# THE LAST SETHU QUEEN

Shobha Sriram

# *The Last Sethu Queen*

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# *The Last Sethu Queen*

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# Dedication

To my mother
and
mother-in-law

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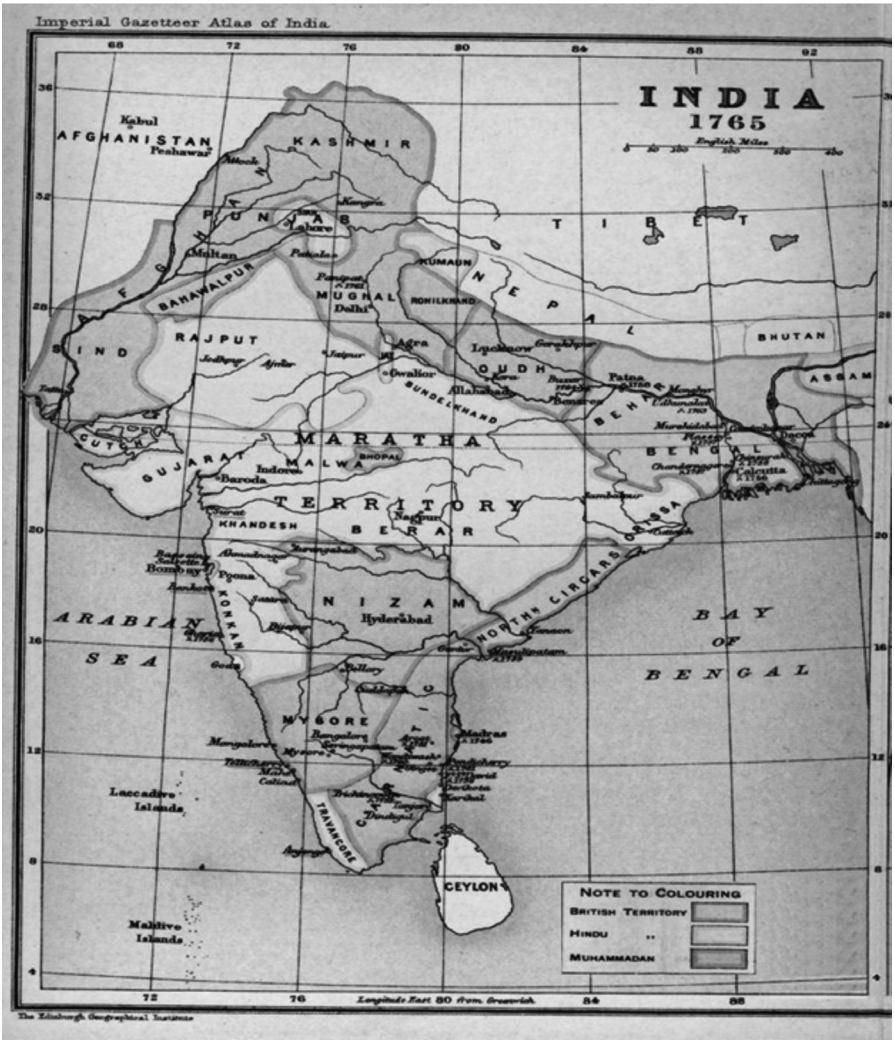
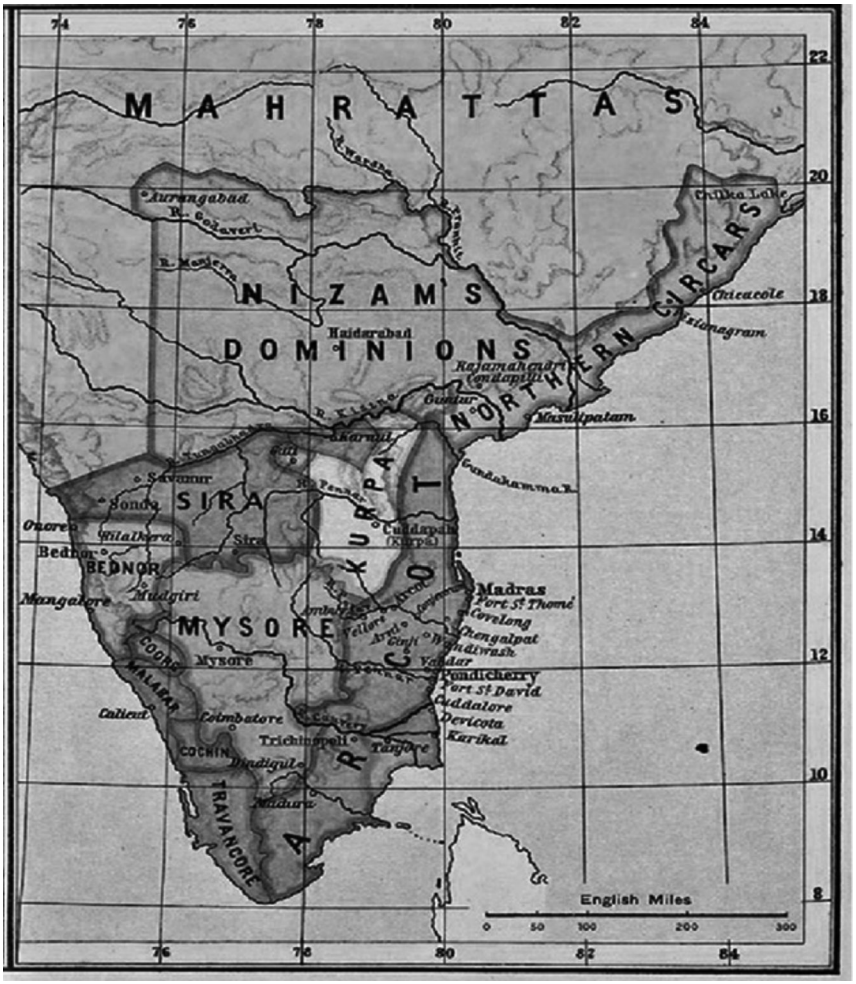
# *Eighteenth Century India*



# *Eighteenth Century South India*



# *A Historical Note*

The eighteenth century was a turbulent era in South India, a tangled network of interwoven threads pulling against each other in a chaotic conflict. The once-mighty Vijayanagara Empire had begun its descent into turmoil, slowly falling prey to the expanding Mughal Empire. Yet, amidst this chaos, the Nayakars, the notable military leaders of the Vijayanagara Empire, retained significant power and autonomy, while paying taxes to the Mughal emperors. Beneath their authority were the *palayakkarars*, the provincial chieftains, whose independence was respected and upheld. Amidst this landscape were other resolute warlords who staunchly defended the autonomy bestowed upon them by the Vijayanagara kings.

As years passed, the Mughal Empire also began to decline, yet in the southern regions, their governors emerged as independent rulers—most prominently the Nawab of Arcot and the Nizam of Hyderabad. Meanwhile, Mysore flourished under Hyder Ali's leadership; with French military support at his disposal, he expanded his realm much to the dismay of the Nawab.

On the southeastern fringes of one of these independent states—the Arcot state—lay Sethu Nadu, encompassing two minor kingdoms: Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram. These regions faced constant threats from powerful neighbors—the Nayakar kingdoms of Thanjavur and Madurai—as well as from the Nawab of Arcot, who was bolstered by British military strength. The Sethu kings

were acutely aware of both the Nawab's precarious financial state and his colonial counterparts' cunning tactics.

The larger kingdom within Sethu Nadu—Ramanathapuram—often referred to as the Greater Marava—thrived due to its maritime prowess and lucrative customs income collected from Dutch traders. Sivaganga, or the Lesser Marava, was also experiencing a golden age under Marava dynasty rule. The kingdom enjoyed remarkable political stability while maintaining dominance over Ramanathapuram through strategic matrimonial alliances and boasting a vibrant economy fueled by overseas trade and commerce—all while consistently asserting its independence from Nawab authority. Sivaganga served as a sanctuary for travelers, bustling with traders and welcoming pilgrims.

The tale you are about to read unfolds in these vibrant and prosperous lands of Sivaganga in 1769.

■

# *Cast of Characters*

**Sivaganga Kingdom**

Rani Velu Nachiyar, Queen of Sivaganga

Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar, King of Sivaganga, Rani Velu Nachiyar's husband

Thandavaraya Pillai, prime minister of Sivaganga

Kuyili, female army commander

Periya Maruthu, personal bodyguard of king of Sivaganga, commander of Rani Velu's army

Chinna Maruthu, personal bodyguard of king of Sivaganga, commander of Rani Velu's army

Princess Vellachi, daughter of the king and queen of Sivaganga

Manickam, Head of Sivaganga scouts

Udaiyal, Young female goatherd

Vetrivel Vadhyar, Rani Velu's *silambam guru*

**Arcot State**

Umdat-al-Umara, Arcot Nawab's son

Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah, Nawab of Arcot

**The British**

Major General Joseph Smith

Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Bonjour

Josias De Pru, Madras Governor (1770-73)
Thomas Rumbold, Madras Governor (1778-81)
Major General Murray McGregor

**Kingdom of Mysore**

Hyder Ali, Sultan of Mysore
Tipu Sultan, son of Hyder Ali
Syed Karki, Dindigul commander of Mysore army

**Virupatchi**

Gopal Nayakar, province chieftain, palayakkarar

**Others**

Mallari Rayan, English loyalist
Ranga Rayan, brother of Mallari Rayan

## *Piranmalai Foothill Forests*
## *Sivaganga Kingdom, Autumn, 1769*

He lay sprawled in the thick, green grass, a faint smile teasing the corners of his lips, as the gentle melody of water burbling over smooth, rounded stones filled the air. The sun kissed his face, warming his cheeks, as he rolled onto his side and caught sight of her. Her brows were knitted together in concentration, and her ears seemed to perk up like those of an alert deer. Instantly, he sat up with a jolt. Her deep brown eyes, intense and unwavering, were locked onto a spot on the ground before her. In that split second, he realized that the dormant warrior spirit within her had detected something lurking in the shadows that his own senses had overlooked.

His eyes flicked towards the shrubs behind her, and he tilted his head, straining to catch even the faintest sound, but silence enveloped him. Still, he sensed that she had detected something with her acute instincts that eluded him, lurking just out of sight. In the next moment, he rose to his feet and leaned forward to peer through the dense foliage. Tall and imposing, with a thick, bushy mustache framing his confident smile, he exuded a boldness—a charisma any Marava woman would find hard to resist.

She crept to her knees, listening intently as she turned her head slowly to the left. A gentle breeze tossed her jet-black hair across her forehead, framing her dimpled, rounded face and pointed nose. She glanced sharply back at her husband, signaling him to remain perfectly still; from the corner of her eye, she had caught sight of

a monstrous tiger lurking just a few feet away. Was it poised to pounce on her, being less muscular and lighter than him? Or was it preparing to attack her husband instead?

Suddenly, the shrubbery sprung to life; leaves rustled violently, twigs snapped underfoot, and birds in the treetops flew away, screeching and flapping wings hard.

With a terrifying rush of air, the tiger leaped. The creature—much larger than a man—descended with a snarl, claws outstretched like hooked knives. Man and beast crashed together in a tangle of limbs and roars, each struggling to overpower the other. Just as the tiger aimed to sink its deadly fangs into her husband's chest, she swung a heavy stick, smashing it against the creature's head. Dazed, the tiger spun towards her with a menacing glare, growling ferociously. The beast lunged at her. She swerved aside, her gaze steady and unfaltering; its momentum sent it crashing into a sturdy banyan trunk tree. The impact jarred through its spine, and it collapsed, legs splaying outwards.

She didn't pause. With the grace of a jungle cat, she leaped onto the animal's broad back, seizing hold of its neck. One hand clamped beneath its lower jaw, fingers digging into its hot, quivering flesh; the other tugged at the roof of its mouth. Warm blood welled between her fingers. The tiger's roar swelled to a thunderous crescendo as it reared on hind legs, teeth sinking deeper into her palm. She bit back her scream, knuckles whitening as it twisted its massive body, claws gouging the earth.

He scrambled to his feet, heart hammering, watching for an opening. The tiger rolled violently on the ground, chuffing in agony as it squirmed free from her grasp until finally breaking loose. She thudded onto the earth below. Leaves and twigs scattered beneath her. Locking eyes with her once more, the beast lunged at her again, gnashing its teeth in fury. In that instant, he hurled his dagger. The steel blade spun through the air, catching a sliver of sunlight, before she seized it and plunged it into the tiger's stomach.

The beast staggered, a pitiful whimper escaping its throat as it sank to its knees and then lay still.

He exhaled, every muscle uncoiling at once, and rushed to her side as she rolled back.

She—Rani Velu Nachiyar, the Queen of Sivaganga—sprang to her feet, a sharp gasp escaping her lips as her long hair tumbled down to her waist. She briefly closed her eyes and murmured, “Thank you, Goddess Raja Rajeswari,” placing her hands on her chest in reverence to the family deity.

Her husband, Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Peria Oodaya Thevar, lifted her towards the waterfalls, drenching her in cool water while holding her hands beneath the cascading stream. Hearing her soft moans of pain filled him with concern; he quickly dashed into the nearby shrubs to gather aloe vera leaves. He ground them into a soothing paste against a stone and gently spread it across her palms. She winced in pain. Wrapping his arms around her, he offered comfort with a tender pat, enveloping her in a warm embrace. As she clung to him tightly, tears streaming down her face, she sobbed, "It's impossible to live without you." Gradually, the intensity of pain began to fade; silence settled over them like a comforting blanket while she continued to hold her palms skyward as if seeking solace from above.

Grasping her firmly once more, Muthu glanced at the lifeless tiger, which trembled in its final throes as its limbs fell limp, one after another. He stared at her, bewildered, and asked, "How did you sense that beast lurking behind you?"

"I heard its low growl," Rani Velu said, a grin spreading across her face as she wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

Muthu's face darkened; it troubled him that he couldn't hear it.

She pressed a gentle kiss to his lips, a soft giggle escaping her as she declared, “I can understand animal language.” With a flourish, she spread her arms wide, tilted her head back, and closed her eyes, holding the pose for a brief moment.

"Of course, you can. Birds of a feather flock together," he teased, giving her arm a playful pinch while waiting for her to open her eyes. When she finally did, he gazed at her with an amused smile and added, "Who doesn't know that a low growl signals a warning?"

"Indeed, my lord." In a low voice, Velu replied, "As the tiger lurked in the bushes, it told me that it wanted to devour, claiming you are as delectable as a raw mango with a mustache." She shot him a hard, contemplative glance and waited for disbelief to flicker across his face before bursting into laughter. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Disarmed, Muthu admitted, "Yes, you caught me with that little trick of yours," and playfully smacked her cheeks. He drew her close and pressed another passionate kiss on her lips. "This one's for saving my life, Rani." With a muffled chortle, she pulled away and gathered the scattered flowers they had been playing with before the attack. By the time she finished, the palace bodyguards had arrived to remove the tiger's carcass. Meanwhile, the *siddha* doctor in their retinue applied layers of healing herbs and wrapped her hands in bandages.

Muthu had always known that Velu was a remarkable woman—the most extraordinary woman among all the kingdoms. He often observed her engaging fluently with ambassadors from neighboring regions in Telugu, Kannada, or Malayalam, and even Urdu. When she seamlessly switched to the foreign tongues of French and English, he found himself pleasantly astonished.

Dismissing her practical joke, he chuckled softly to himself, "Now let's add animal language to the list."

Muthu's love for Velu had not diminished; if anything, his eyes sparkled with an even brighter radiance. So beautiful, so protective, and brimming with promise and skill, she was everything to him. While his mother was kind and nurturing, and his father good yet distant, Velu offered companionship that surpassed theirs—she was more than just an obedient wife; she was a consort who matched him in every regard.

Occasionally, he would visit the border forts to inspect the garrison, with Velu accompanying him a few times each year; yet the moments he cherished most—the true contentment he felt as the King of Sivaganga—came when he listened to Velu's insights on the kingdom's affairs.

Retreating into the tranquil forest near the waterfalls provided Muthu and Velu with a perfect sanctuary to rejuvenate together. Muthu had resolved not to pay tribute to Governor Lord Pigot, but it was Velu who highlighted the recent famine affecting their villages and the scant produce available in the region. She took it upon herself to request ledgers from the palace accountants, meticulously checking revenue and expense accounts for accuracy.

Furthermore, it was Velu who boldly entered the *durbar* hall to convey to Pigot—in his own language—the harsh reality of heavy taxation and the necessity for a delay. With a point-by-point rebuttal, she eloquently articulated her message in flawless English, leaving Pigot both astonished and impressed.

"Rani Velu Nachiyar!" he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with admiration as she strolled towards the waterfalls, tilting her face to welcome the cascading water that danced across her lovely features. Velu! Still youthful and vibrant, yet possessing a womanly grace that surpassed many who were already married and raising children.

Muthu sighed softly. Despite all the blessings bestowed by the goddess, they remained childless. His mother had long ceased her gentle nudgings after twenty-three years of persistent hope. Meanwhile, his beloved father had passed away, leaving him with the throne and its burden. They had made every effort, but the relentless strain of their tumultuous surroundings took its toll. Initially, life felt like an endless celebration; then tragedy struck—his father was murdered during a temple visit when an arrow pierced through the air. Yes, murdered. Following that dark day came famine, oppressive taxes, and a constant undercurrent of fear—threats loomed large on the horizon like storm clouds heralding war. Yet through it all, they visited countless temples, offering food, gold coins, and garments

in devotion. Muthu couldn't shake off his thoughts: after all their good deeds, what kind of goddess was she if she cannot show mercy?

With a deep groan of frustration that made his chest rise and fall, Muthu commanded the retinue to return to the palace. The autumn air was brisk, and the second harvest before the rains approached; the people would have ample food to sustain them through winter. If the goddess accepted their offerings during *Navaratri*, the nine-day festival, and blessed the lands, there would be an abundance of rice and vegetables for the people to last through the *Margazhi* winter and to store before the upcoming harvest season in early spring.

If someone were to ask him how he coped with life after his father's death, he would reply, "Not too badly." So far, life has been relatively easy. He ruled over a vast kingdom and, along with his people, had been fortunate enough to avoid numerous conflicts with the Nawab of Arcot, other rulers, and even the English. They had engaged in only a few skirmishes along the borders and had provided infantry brigades to support the Nawab or the neighboring Thanjavur Raja. His land thrived with prosperity; despite collecting a share of the farmers' harvests, receiving yearly payments from the Dutch—which were diminishing each year—and imposing taxes across more than fifty provinces or *palayams*, he and his wife enjoyed a warm rapport with their subjects.

Teaching young ladies the art of *silambam*, a skillful bamboo combat technique, filled Velu with immense joy. She also relished the chance to listen intently and respond with precision during tactical discussions with army generals and the prime minister. Yet, despite her many talents, Velu had not yet given him a child to inherit the kingdom.

Married at just sixteen, she was now nearing forty. Although her physique remained that of a young woman—toned, tall, and captivating—it became increasingly evident that if they were to pass away without an heir, the throne would remain vacant. In ancient Tamil culture, succession favored any child, whether son

or daughter. If only Velu could bear a child, their lineage would continue, and that child would ascend as heir to the throne. Otherwise, they would need to consider adoption. He exhaled deeply; a long sigh escaped his lips.

As the rani stepped into the palanquin, he noticed her suddenly pivot and exit, standing perfectly still. He turned as well, fully aware that she had sensed something once more. She cast him a quick glance before gently placing a finger to her lips, urging him to be quiet. Crouching low behind the undergrowth and signaling for the palanquin-bearers to follow suit, she leaned forward intently. As he moved softly towards her, Muthu cautiously scanned their surroundings. There was no sign of life in the distance—no birds flitting about or animals stirring—and the air felt cool. Nonetheless, he approached Velu in silence, honoring her sharp instincts.

"Trampling footsteps," she murmured as he knelt beside her.

Peering through the dense foliage, he spotted nothing amiss. Even as Velu pointed towards a distant area, his eyes failed to catch any sign of movement.

"How many?" he asked, a note of concern creeping into his voice.

"A lot," she replied tersely.

They both crouched lower, straining to listen, and soon the unmistakable sound of footsteps crunching on the muddy path reached their ears. Just below the crest of Piranmalai hill, around a bend in the road, a group of twenty men emerged, their figures silhouetted against the fading light. They carried bulging sacks, and several were armed with sticks and swords, while others brandished *valaris*—those lethal metal boomerangs that glinted ominously in the twilight.

“They aren’t a threat to us. It’s safe to stand up,” Muthu declared. He rose from his seat and strode towards a scout approaching them. After a brief exchange, Muthu returned to Velu's side. “So, who are they?” she asked.

"The rebel, Puli Thevar's men," Muthu replied.

"But didn't he die two winters ago?"

"Indeed. These are his loyal generals regrouping."

"Where are they heading?"

"To the west, towards Madurai. The English are gathering in large numbers in the cantonments of Chidambaram and Tiruchirapalli up north, close to Thanjavur. Their intentions are not clear. They seem to have a fluid relationship with the Thanjavur Raja."

"Should we be concerned?" Velu inquired.

"It depends. If we choose to confront the English like Puli Thevar did, then yes, we should be worried. If not, like the Nawab of Arcot, then no; we simply learn to coexist with them."

Velu hesitated, waiting for Muthu to clarify their stance against the English. Instead, he remarked, "Come to think of it; the cunning Wallajah is using the English; he might even be allowing them to enter into our lands, but it's too early and complicated for certain," he said.

"Wallajah? You mean the Nawab of Arcot?" she asked.

Muthu nodded in agreement.

After a moment, she pressed further, "What do you mean by this fluid relationship with Thanjavur Raja?"

"My father used to say that the weakening of the Mughal Empire sparked feuds among the Nazims, who were the senior official revenue collectors in the Deccan and Carnatic, leading to the Carnatic Wars. The French backed Deccan while the British sided with Carnatic. Ultimately, it was the British who triumphed, paving the way for Wallajah to become the Nawab of Carnatic, also known as the Arcot Nawab or Nawab of Arcot," he explained.

"Well, isn't the ruler of Deccan referred to as the Nizam of Hyderabad rather than Nazim? In Urdu, Nazim refers specifically to senior revenue collectors," she interjected.

"Good question. The Mughals granted a personal title of Nizam to the Nazim of Deccan, hence he is called the Nizam of Hyderabad."

"So how does the Thanjavur Raja fit into this picture?" she pressed on.

"The British and the Arcot Nawab are like two peas in a pod; they are steadfast allies. The British lend large sums to the Nawab at exorbitant interest rates, eyeing both real and imagined territories within Arcot state. Unfortunately, this has ensnared the Nawab in a debt trap," he elaborated.

"What do you mean by real and imaginary lands?"

"The Nawab once oversaw all of Carnatic territory under Mughal rule; the Nayakar kingdoms within it would send their taxes annually. However, as Mughal power waned, so did his authority over those kingdoms. A few ceased their payments altogether and declared independence. Yet, in the Nawab's mind, they remain under his control; thus he sends British enforcers to collect dues. Some comply while others refuse," he clarified.

"Will what they collect be sufficient to cover both his enormous expenses and those interest payments owed to the British?" she queried.

"I can't say for certain. But I do know that the British are keenly interested in his collateral—his lands and forts—so they continue to stick with him," Muthu replied thoughtfully.

"But doesn't Thanjavur Raja pay his revenues directly to him?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, indeed. The Thanjavur Raja pays according to old Mughal accounts but faces constant harassment from the Nawab for more funds than agreed upon. Sometimes, when presented with bills and proof regarding tax amounts calculated by the raja's officials, even the British accept it without suspicion. However, if the British support the raja's claims too openly, it irks the Nawab—he grows suspicious that the raja might sway them in his favor. Thus, the relationship between the British and the Thanjavur Raja remains tactically fluctuating."

“Doesn’t that mean that any money collected ultimately goes back into British hands?” Velu tilted her head curiously.

“It’s possible but we must tread carefully—we can't choose sides just yet,” Muthu said thoughtfully while stroking his chin.

Suddenly, Velu let out a dry heave and fainted, stumbling as she fell. Muthu swiftly caught her in his arms and gently laid her inside the palanquin.

"Quick, quick," he commanded urgently. The royal party hastened their return home.

■

# *Fort St George, Madras, East India Company Headquarters, 1770*

Josias Du Pre sat in the consultation room on the fort's top floor, enveloped in a thick silence as he endured the tedious tirade of Prince Umdat-al-Umara, son of the Arcot Nawab. His tone dripped with disdain, treating Josias as if he were a mere mercenary soldier rather than the Governor of Madras—the most influential figure in the province. True, a British engineer had constructed Chepauk Palace for the Nawab only a couple of kilometers away six years ago, but that hardly justified Umdat's unexpected intrusion into the fort. The Madras Council was in session that morning, and as its head, Josias was guiding discussions over critical matters.

If this had been a decade earlier when they merely acted as tax collectors for the Nawab, he and his fellow council members would have answered every question posed by Umdat with unwavering deference. Now, however, they had ascended to a more significant role as arbiters thanks to the Thanjavur Raja. Yet, even with this elevation, the Nawab and his family remained indifferent, denying the respect they had rightfully earned.

With an exasperated sigh, Josias steeled himself against rising frustration; he knew that losing his temper could lead council members to voice discontent to the Governor-General, for such whispers could threaten his position. So he transformed initial anger into a quiet indifference and braced himself for yet another round of trivial inquiries from Umdat. It always circled back to one theme: why hadn't the British launched an attack against Thanjavur? Why

were they wasting time exchanging letters of payments instead of taking decisive action?

Each time Umdat's relentless questioning pierced through Josias's calm facade, he responded with a weak grunt. He couldn't fathom why this insufferable son of the Nawab sought him out when it should have been Eyre Coote—the military commander—who addressed such matters. No matter how urgent Umdat sounded, his lack of fervor failed to hold Josias's attention; instead, his thoughts drifted towards his new estate in Buckinghamshire—a property recently acquired from the Basil family using the commission he earned after the successful treaty with the Thanjavur Raja; then he thought of the rooms that needed to be repaired, maybe taking home some construction materials or the designs he was working with here if a complete remodeling was required; from there, he thought of how he had established himself in England despite being born in South Carolina in the United Colonies—rumor had it that it could change its name to United States of America if it got its freedom.

With another heavy sigh, he recalled how powerful he had once felt as a civil servant back home while now finding himself sidelined by Eyre Coote's command. His subordinates made key decisions freely while Josias found himself shackled by duty—compelled to placate discontented Nawabs with endless exchanges of words. Still, if this three-year stint allowed him to amass more wealth despite feeling stripped of authority, perhaps contentment awaited him for the rest of his life. A sense of tranquility would still be a welcome change, at the very least.

Umdat stretched out across the polished teakwood table, his voice a ceaseless torrent of self-adulation. Josias inhaled deeply, the air thick with the weight of expectation pressing against his chest like an iron shroud. He fought against the urge to look away, forcing himself to wear a mask of solemnity as he endured Umdat's unending monologue. The council members flanked him, their expressions betraying a blend of ennui and practiced attentiveness.

As Umdat's words cascaded around him, Josias's thoughts drifted into a realm of half-remembered moments, their echoes tugging at him and drawing him further from the stifling confines of the present.

Eight years ago, long before he ascended to the role of governor, Josias served as a diligent official within the East India Company. His task was to scrutinize the revenue accounts of the Thanjavur Raja, who found himself under pressure from the Nawab, ordered to pay a staggering crore and twenty-nine lakh rupees in arrears, alongside an annual tribute of seven lakh rupees and surrendering control of Coilady. Upon delving into the records, Josias uncovered significant discrepancies in the Nawab's financial assessments. The raja presented compelling evidence: bills confirming his payments and a document for Coilady, marked with the Nawab's own signet ring—a token of his earlier concession.

After settling twenty-seven lakhs in arrears, the raja proposed sensible terms: erase any remaining debts and adjust future tributes to two lakhs annually based on old Mughal accounts. Though reluctant and outwardly disapproving, the Nawab ultimately accepted these conditions when a treaty was signed. Satisfied that he had pleased his superiors without costing them a single penny, Josias felt a swell of pride; after all, with their limited troop numbers, war was an expense they could ill afford.

From that moment on, the raja adhered to the treaty meticulously. He ensured every payment was made promptly and never hesitated to respond when summoned by the Nawab for provisions or arms needed for conflict.

As Josias pondered with pride, a senior member raised his hand, breaking into his thoughts. Umdat halted mid-sentence.

"Your Majesty," the member inquired, "After the treaty was signed, what prompted your father to interfere with the Kaveri waters?"

"What water?" Umdat snapped, his jaws tightening.

The council member leaned in, urgency etched across his face. "Your father diverted the river's flow into a parallel channel. Now, the fertile fields along its banks—the richest in the region—are parched. The crops are withering, and the dam has suffered damage, Your Majesty."

"But we closed the channel," Umdat replied, his tone defensive. A smirk tugged at the corners of the governor's mouth. Had he not compelled the Nawab to close it, the raja would have seized the opportunity to leverage the situation, possibly contending for low revenues and withholding his usual payment. This would have drawn the ire of the cash-strapped British Crown, placing the Madras Council under intense scrutiny.

Another council member chimed in, "Why would your father travel all the way to London, inviting unwanted interference from the ministry with the company? Why inflict their representative, Lindsay, upon us to oversee our affairs, only to spread discontent—a parallel rule in every sense?"

"You should ask my father," replied Umdat flatly.

"We send our agents to verify every trivial complaint your father brings against the raja. That drains our coffers." A member sitting near Umdat leaned in, whispering urgently.

"Haven't you gained plenty from this alliance? Don't we pay all your expenses?" Umdat's eyes narrowed as he pressed on. An uncomfortable silence ensued, thick with tension.

Umdat launched into another tirade, his voice rising and falling like the tide. The governor found himself cornered, forced to endure Umdat's incessant complaints about the raja. Instead of immersing himself in plans for his estate back in England or penning affectionate letters to his wife, he was now captive to a man whose energy seemed better suited for the raucous atmosphere of a cockfight, where he might squawk at the royal birds or chase down a boar during a hunt.

Umdat's words swirled around them, filled with talk of war and wealth—topics that could hold weight but were often clouded by his unpredictable temperament. When the Nawab or his vakil spoke, their tone was measured and diplomatic; they understood the importance of maintaining composure. But Umdat? His fierce passion sometimes overwhelmed reason, prompting Josias to shut out the noise entirely, closing his eyes against the frustration that gnawed at him. The other members shared in this silent exasperation, their attention drifting as Umdat continued unabated.

Where, Josias wondered, did Eyre Coote disappear when he was much needed? Why did he leave yesterday in such a hurry, avoiding this mad son of the Nawab, the loudmouth, who carried as much unruliness as a local lout or an irascible youth? Where was the Nawab? Where was his vakil?

A name that Umdat uttered at the conclusion of his lengthy discourse jolted the governor's drifting thoughts back to the relentless stream of words: Hyder Ali, the Sultan of Mysore.

Umdat's voice resonated through the chamber as he declared, "Hyder Ali's court has been inundated with lavish gifts from the raja. Our informants within the Mysore court have reported a steady exchange of treasures and correspondence. Among the offerings were gold ingots, silver trinkets, glittering gemstones, and an impressive contingent of fifty elephants. Yet, amidst this grandeur, a few carts from the ox caravan—despite their heavy guard—fell prey to highway robbers who plundered them mercilessly. The caravan returned battered and stripped of its riches. Any other raja would have retreated in the face of such loss, but not this one. He pressed on undeterred, dispatching yet another shipment of gifts in his quest to win Hyder Ali's favor."

"Hyder Ali?" Josias roared, his voice echoing off the intricately painted walls of the sunlit chamber. A chill ran down his spine at the mere mention of the name. It was infuriating that this foolish son of the Nawab could be so blind; the British stood no chance against a strategist like Hyder Ali. The only way to maintain their

fragile alliance was to keep the Thanjavur Raja placated, preventing any hint of weakness from surfacing. “Yes, indeed, the very same Hyder Ali,” Umdat replied, a sly smile spreading across his lips as he slowly pivoted to face Josias.

Josias's brow furrowed with urgency as he pressed, “Who represents the raja at Hyder Ali’s court?” The royal son leaned in closer, his gaze piercing. “It’s the raja’s vakil,” he replied, a hint of indignation in his voice. “The raja didn’t even see fit to inform my father about any of this. Yet when we demand taxes, he suddenly claims there’s no money available. He offers a meager amount and insists it’s a fair settlement.”

Josias erupted into laughter, his voice echoing through the chamber. “Hasn’t your father clued in? It was my idea to send that vakil to Hyder Ali’s court for intelligence gathering. The Nawab was all for it.”

“But not the gifts,” the royal son interjected, his tone brash and mocking.

“Right, so he sprinkled some gifts alongside the information—what of it? He’s a raja, a sovereign tributary of the Nawab, not some wretched servant,” the governor retorted sharply. A knowing smile crept across his face as he recalled the raja’s repeated pleas for protection. Each time, they had promised their allegiance, but only if he continued to pay the customary tributes to the Nawab.

He pressed on, his voice steady and unwavering. “Your grandfather's hold on the Carnatic was tenuous, to say the least. With the Mughal Empire crumbling, the rajas ceased their customary tributes. Who else did you turn to for help? Was it not our army that came to your aid?”

“But you managed to fortify your position against the French thanks to our unwavering support in Madras,” retorted the young prince, a glint of defiance in his eyes. The council members exchanged glances, their breath held in anticipation of an impending clash between Josias and Umdat. They observed the exchange with keen interest, eager for sparks to fly in this heated debate.

Nonchalant, Josias pressed on. “Remember that Thanjavur Raja defended Trichinopoly, preventing the French from entering Carnatic. Had he not held firm against their assaults, our present conversation would be far less tranquil; we wouldn’t be sitting here chatting so peacefully. Your father refused to acknowledge him as an independent king or even a true ally; rather, he forced the raja into a tributary role,” he remarked, gazing at the royal son with a glint of sadistic pleasure in his eyes.”

Continuing, “You seem to overlook the many battles we waged to secure your father’s position as the Nawab of Carnatic or the Nawab of Arcot, whichever title you prefer. You also conveniently forget how the raja supported us in those wars, while your father repeatedly turned down any chance for a settlement with him,” Josias remarked.

“And you don’t forget how these wars ended with the total expulsion of the French troops in the Carnatic, establishing you, a foreign power, as the foundation of power and influence here. And, in helping us, your ally, you have effectively acquired a subordinate—the raja.” Umdat’s voice thundered.

He then let a moment of silence hang in the air, gauging the governor's unwavering loyalty to the raja. With a flicker of mischief in his eyes, he shifted his approach, lacing his words with mockery. “Yet you still fell to Hyder Ali’s forces last year,” he said, a smirk curling at the corners of his lips. “And let’s not forget—your precious raja was listed as your ally in that treaty.” The assembly turned their gazes towards Josias, awaiting his response.

"We never acknowledged that," Josias replied, his expression impassive.

"But my father’s name is absent from the records. So much for our supposed alliance!" Umdat let out a frustrated groan, the sound echoing in the tense air of the chamber.

After a moment's silence, he leaned forward, his dark eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Your fervent defense of the raja might

lead one to believe you've forged a secret pact with him. If that's the case, why align yourself with us?"

The other members of the court exchanged glances, aware of Josias's deep-seated disdain for Umdat and bracing for an outburst. Instead, Josias offered a measured response, laced with feigned humility. "I apologize if I gave such an impression, Your Highness. The British owe their allegiance solely to you—only to you. Our ventures here began only because the Nawab permitted them to do so. We remain steadfastly loyal to your cause; please do not mistake my words." His tone was smooth yet calculated, masking any underlying contempt as he spoke.

The high ceiling, adorned with sturdy teak wood beams, loomed above them like watchful sentinels. Their coolness provided a welcome respite from the sweltering heat of Madras, creating an atmosphere conducive to countless meetings, impassioned debates, and intricate analyses. The local clay bricks, thin yet remarkably dense, framed the edges of the room; though they could have challenged the pervasive coolness, they remained silent witnesses to the unfolding discussions.

"Let us not forget that we fought against this raja upon your urging two decades ago," Josias asserted, his voice firm as he stood resolutely in defense of the raja.

"You seized Devakottai, a prized territory of Thanjavur, did you not? Those lush fields bring you no less than twelve thousand rupees each year. The raja even compensated you with a lakh of rupees for your military expenditures." The words spilled from the young prince's lips, charged with indignation.

"Had your father possessed strength to command loyalty from your tributaries, we would have never found ourselves involved in this matter at all." Josias sneered, a smug smile creeping across his lips. His laughter bounced off the walls of the chamber, loud and contagious. The others joined in, their hands pounding against the table in hearty agreement.

Umdat lowered his head slightly, a flicker of shame crossing his features. He met Josias's gaze with kohl-stained eyes, a taunting glint lingering in his expression. “The war you lost to Hyder—weren’t we fighting alongside you when he launched his attack? Even the Nizam of Hyderabad, who had claimed to support you, abandoned ship to negotiate peace with Hyder as soon as he sensed our defeat. He left you stranded. But we didn’t.”

Josias shifted uncomfortably. “This expedition was a folly we should never have embarked upon. It was driven solely by your desire for power and ambition. The Nizam of Hyderabad may have promised you the lands of Mysore, but he turned traitor himself. It was destined to fail from the start.” His frustration surged, his voice rising sharply.

"But you, with your mighty military strength, couldn't defeat that insignificant son of a military commander, Hyder Ali, who dares to call himself the Sultan of Mysore. You ought to engage in some self-reflection, perhaps analyze his military tactics, and devise effective counterattacks," muttered the royal son.

"You must be mad. Hyder Ali has long been deemed a formidable and dangerous adversary by our council. Your reckless ambition has brought us nothing but disgrace," Josias exclaimed, his voice rising in intensity. The other members nodded in agreement, their expressions reflecting a shared concern. He turned to the royal son, expecting a counterargument. Umdat remained silent, his face rigid and unyielding.

Josias had been aware for some time that the Nawab sought to annex Thanjavur into his realm and was relentlessly pushing for war to achieve that goal. The Nawab aimed to steer clear of the type of mediation the British offered, which often left them with the upper hand in negotiations while ostensibly resolving disputes. Josias suspected that the Nawab felt a deep sense of insecurity; with the British providing protection and oversight for the raja, Thanjavur could easily become a tributary to the British right under the Nawab’s watchful eye.

Indeed, the negotiations had granted the British a significant advantage; they had gained power. And who could say what would happen if the illustrious Thanjavur kingdom, renowned for its bountiful lands, was to yield to the British as a tributary? London would undoubtedly be impressed. However, that was a distant prospect. Josias believed it certainly wouldn't occur within the next three years. Conversely, company policy dictated that he remain aligned with the Nawab. Given how persistently the Nawab was provoking Thanjavur, causing one rift after another, it wouldn't be surprising if Thanjavur sought assistance from Hyder Ali. Should Hyder Ali choose to back Thanjavur, chaos would erupt.

The British found it favorable to uphold peace in the Carnatic, not just due to Hyder Ali's looming presence but also because of the escalating war debts that the Nawab had yet to settle. He had managed to pay only a fraction, offering up a handful of forts and parcels of land as collateral. But Umdat, the hot-tempered heir of the Nawab, was, after all, denting Josias's steadfast resolve. And, Josias was bound by the company's directives, explicitly outlined in Macaulay's essay on their governance: *to govern the motions and speak through the mouth of some glittering puppet, dignified by the title Nawab or Nizam*. As he pondered this reality, his eyes narrowed with shrewd calculation while a slow smile crept across his lips, hinting at an unspoken resolve.

A bird caught in the hand was far more valuable than a pair fluttering beyond reach. The Nawab's vast estates and resources overshadowed the raja's consistent conduct, prompt payments, strict adherence to protocol, and unwavering loyalty. What unpredictable moves might the raja make if he felt threatened? Would he seek an alliance with Hyder? Josias thought, perhaps following the company policy was wiser than relying on personal instincts.

Accepting the Nawab's demands would require engaging in a battle with Thanjavur, a costly endeavor that the British could ill afford. Their resources were already stretched thin, despite having successfully driven out the Portuguese, Dutch, and French from

their territories. Still, they struggled to secure their foothold in the Carnatic region. The losses from previous conflicts and the Nawab's increasing debts had created a big hole in the British treasury. As a result, military leaders recommended that troops remain within their garrisons instead of embarking on new operations. Meanwhile, London urged them to avoid spending even a single penny.

"It's a difficult situation we find ourselves in," a member murmured, his brow furrowed. The others exchanged glances and nodded in agreement.

Josias felt an overwhelming urge to distance himself from the mounting pressure of responsibility. It was Eyre Coote who should make the call; after all, it was his duty to sit through the debates and impassioned speeches to reach a conclusion. Yet that had not happened, Josias pondered.

Another voice broke through the tension, suggesting, "What if we pursued a diplomatic route?"

The idea struck Josias like a spark igniting dry tinder—why not? If such an approach could bring him peace for the rest of his days, then it was worth considering.

Umdat shifted uneasily in his chair, his fingers drumming against the wooden armrest as he wrestled with his thoughts. Finally, he rose to his feet, determination etched on his face.

The sharp, chalky aroma of freshly lime-washed walls from the imposing British fort mingled with the salty sea breeze, creating an unmistakable signature of colonial ambition. Josias felt a heavy weight settle on his shoulders as he scanned the council chamber; every gaze was fixed on him, anticipation crackling in the silence. He adjusted his posture, crossing his legs with deliberate calm, and met Umdat's piercing dark eyes. Dressed in sumptuous brocade that caught the light just so, Umdat exuded an air of youthful authority, embodying all the trappings of a junior Nawab poised for command.

Umdat leaned closer, his voice low and conspiratorial. “Can we speak privately?” he asked, glancing around to ensure no prying ears lingered nearby. After Josias had sent the disgruntled council members away, Umdat continued softly, “It’s true; my father’s letter to the raja demanded fourteen lakh rupees for the failed expedition against Hyder Ali. But, just yesterday, he found an error in his calculations: it’s actually twenty-five lakh rupees,” he said, winking. He continued, “He insisted that the authorities in Madras can take the extra amount for themselves.”

Josias stroked his chin thoughtfully, a smirk creeping onto his lips. “Hmm,” he mused. “But we still lack the funds to start a war with Thanjavur. Even London has run dry.” He paused, locking eyes with Umdat. “You and your father understand as well as I do that engaging in a full-scale war with Thanjavur would likely lead to our utter ruin—especially if Thanjavur decides to ally with Hyder Ali.”

“Then let’s take it step by step,” Umdat proposed earnestly.

“Absolutely, let’s employ the tactics of divide and rule,” Josias replied, a spark of renewed vigor lighting up his expression.

Umdat said, “Perhaps you could also report a lesser sum to your superiors and keep the surplus for yourself. I understand you intend to expand your estate in Buckinghamshire.” His tone was soft, yet laced with sweetness as he continued, “I possess a letter bearing the Nawab’s seal, with a blank space for the amount. You simply fill in the figure, and it shall be arranged.”

Josias leaned back in his chair, the cool breeze from the cloth fan stirring the air around him. He raised a hand, catching the eye of the *punkah* man who diligently worked the ropes overhead. The rhythmic swaying of the fan cast playful shadows on the walls, momentarily distracting him from his thoughts. With a commanding voice that echoed through the room, he called out, “Bring me an assistant!”

As a young aide hurried in, scribbling tools in hand, Josias's gaze sharpened with intent. “Draft a letter to Eyre Coote,” he

declared, his tone brooking no argument. The weight of his words hung in the air like an impending storm, signaling that this letter would not be taken lightly.

"Where shall we begin?" Josias inquired, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. A broad grin stretched across his face, radiating a contagious energy.

"Thanjavur's two vassal kingdoms: Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram," Umdat replied with a nod.

Josias's eyebrows shot up in delight. "Oh, brilliant!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together as if savoring the prospect of a grand adventure.

■

# *Sivaganga Palace, 1770*

At the precise holy moment, Appa whispered the name Vellachi into the baby's ears three times. Her smile burst into babbles and louder into joyful chuckles, resonating with the holy chants and hymns echoing throughout the *kalyana mandapam*, a large ceremony hall. A sudden light rain accompanied by a cool breeze drifted over the granite rostrum through the open pillars, refreshing the sacred fire pit and dispersing the smoke around the bejeweled royal pedestal. Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Oodaya Thevar sat upright, gripping the lion head armrest beside Rani Velu Nachiyar, who held their daughter, Vellachi, on her lap.

Muthu held his head high, his gaze steady and purposeful. His mouth set in a firm line. In the bright mid-morning light, his crown sparkled, radiating vigor and vitality despite the passage of years. Nearly twenty years had passed since he ascended the throne and wed the only daughter of the neighboring king of Ramanathapuram, Rani Velu Nachiyar. As an undefeated warrior, he had skillfully kept Sethu Naadu—hemmed in by enemies on all sides—intact and flourishing.

They ruled the land of Sivaganga, the original Marava kings descended from the Sethupathy lineage, guardians of the pilgrims journeying to Rameswaram. His father was the King of Sivaganga, a territory that extended from the Thanjavur kingdom in the north to his father-in-law's kingdom in the south. However, they faced threats from the Pandya kings in the west, who had attempted an invasion several years ago. The sudden onslaught had forced Muthu

to fend them off while the royal ladies hurried into the narrow, secret passage beneath the balcony by the queen's bathing pool, escaping just in time—a memory that haunted his wife. He had taken care to heed his father-in-law's counsel against allowing her participation in battle; her martial training was intended solely for her own defense.

Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram were collectively known as Sethu Naadu, a name resonating with the region's rich heritage. In the years following his birth, the reigning Raja of Thanjavur had aided Muthu's father and Velu's father in their quest to reclaim this vital region. The two kings then divided Sethu Naadu: three-fifths became known as Ramanathapuram, while Sivaganga claimed the remaining two-fifths. But, five years into Muthu's reign, a descendant of that same Thanjavur Raja launched an aggressive attack against Sivaganga fifteen years ago, seizing border territories near Aranthangi. After seven arduous years of conflict, those lands were reclaimed by Muthu's forces, restoring honor to his lineage.

Thandavaraya Pillai, the Chief Minister of Sivaganga, fondly called Appa by the queen, stepped aside, and Rani Velu felt struck by the attention of a thousand gazes upon her. Every neighboring king, *palayakkarar*, and feudal lord had gathered to pay their respects, to behold the heir to the throne, to witness her naming ceremony, and to forge alliances with a mix of anxious optimism amidst the chaos of their realms, demanding monarchs, and encroaching English mercenaries. Each king was eager for unity, while every *palayakkarar* was eager for favors and lower tributes. The hall buzzed with an atmosphere of hope and happiness.

The rani's face radiated with pride; anxiety had yielded to relief, and relief had blossomed into pride. Her matrimonial kingdom, Sivaganga, spanned fifty expansive provinces; it would take at least a week on horseback to traverse from one end to the other. After more than twenty years, her affection for the palace remained unwavering—every inch of it was etched in her memory as vividly as the lines on her palm.

She marveled at the formidable compound walls, five *mulams* thick and built from limestone, fortified with a unique mortar blend that made them virtually impervious; the secret lay in the combination of gallnuts, eggs, and sugarcane juice. The grand pillars supporting the ceilings throughout the palace grounds were so massive that they required three people clasping hands around them to encircle even one. When her father-in-law passed away two decades ago, her husband ascended the throne in the marble square of the court hall, a throne meticulously carved from black marble.

The palace once boasted an army of three thousand during her father-in-law's reign but had since expanded significantly. Such was the legacy of this kingdom that she had finally given birth—a child destined to carry it forward—after twenty-three long years. Thus, a grand naming ceremony unfolded—a momentous celebration for Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar and Rani Velu Nachiyar.

On the day she gave birth, whitewashing began; the palace walls shimmered with a baked shell lime wash. Clean and immaculate, they were further consecrated for the ceremony. Just this morning, after ten days of confinement following childbirth, she emerged to indulge in her private pool once more. How she yearned for those bathing rituals—the refreshing splashes of cool water flowing from the sacred pond through underground ducts into her pool, while used water cascaded off to another pool made for bathing elephants and horses!

A frenzied flurry of activity had begun well before dawn: fresh mango leaf festoons adorned every door; plantain trees, heavy with banana bunches symbolizing prosperity, were tied to both sides of the entrance gates and the front door; vibrant *rangolis* decorated the floors at every turn; jasmine garlands were skillfully woven by nimble fingers; and wicker baskets brimming with roses, chrysanthemums, various types of jasmine, and marigolds filled the *puja* room. Even the huts of the palace maid and manservant nestled in the marshlands behind the palace exuded the sweet scents of flowers and incense. At the farthest end, smoke curled from earthen ovens where an array of

dishes awaited their turn to be cooked. The delightful aroma of food mingled with the fragrances of flowers, sandalwood paste, and rose perfume wafting through the grounds, lifting spirits high.

Seven years had passed since her father's death. As the only child and heir, she possessed the undeniable right to govern Ramanathapuram, the Greater Marava. Yet, in a surprising turn of events, she chose to relinquish this privilege to a distant cousin, a young boy, granting him the authority to rule in her place. She then dedicated herself to managing the administrative affairs of her husband's realm—the lesser Marava—offering her insights on strategy as well. While Ramanathapuram may have been larger than Sivaganga, boasting greater revenues and a more vibrant coastal trade, Rani Velu's heart remained steadfastly with her husband.

Muthu rose from the intricately carved pedestal, and everyone knelt in reverence before him. He gestured towards Rani Velu, who bowed gracefully, her silk saree cascading in a rich tapestry of crimson and gold around her waist. Muthu wrapped his strong fingers around her delicate arm, raising her slowly to her feet. His gaze locked onto hers, a silent conversation passing between them that spoke of the weight of the moment, each heartbeat echoing their shared resolve.

Cloaked in a silk shawl and holding a gold scepter, Muthu paced down the hall, following the Brahmin priests as they sprinkled holy water from a copper jug. Benzoin fumes mingled with the fragrance of incense sticks, swirling upward in fragrant tendrils. Rani Velu walked behind her husband with a stately tread, a mild bow counterbalancing the weight of the child she cradled and the bold, heavy ornaments adorning her slender figure. Her crimson gold silk saree clung elegantly to a golden chest band, dazzling with each step. The *nadaswaram* trumpeted loudly, its soulful notes blending with the rhythmic beat of the *thavil* drum as it soared to a grand finale, invoking blessings from Goddess Raja Rajeswari, their royal family deity.

Outside the hall, the palace temple stood adjacent to the doorway of the *durbar*—court—hall, away from the expansive area where crowds had gathered in the cool month of January—the Tamil month of *Thai*—to catch a glimpse of the eleven-day-old princess. Atop the steps, the palace guards appeared with staffs in hand, hailing:

*"Rajadhiraja, Raja Parameswara, Raja Marthanda, Raja Gambheera, Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Oodaya Thevar, Paraak, Paraak, Paraak*!"

Moments later, the King and Queen emerged after their prayers at the temple. This customary title-hailing before the king's appearance was a tradition that spanned centuries. The Sivaganga kings were entitled to four titles recognized by both the Thanjavur and Madurai Rajas; indeed, they were responsible for conferring these titles upon the Sethu Naadu rulers.

Rani Velu observed the lines of men and women standing there as she heard cries of blessings and gratitude.

"Hail Raja Muthu!" "Hail Rani Velu!" "Hail baby Vellachi, the fair princess!"

Although she distributed only *sarees* and *veshtis*, tears of relief and joy flowed freely among those present.

How time had flown! She remembered that day as beautiful—the day she first saw the palace she was entering as a new bride, carefully stepping forward with her right foot to cross the grand entrance gates. Her father, the King of Ramanathapuram, Vetrivel Vadhyar—her *silambam guru*—her husband, in-laws, ladies-in-waiting, and a dozen bridesmaids and groomsmen; it was the same Tamil month of *Thai*. The cold air nipped at her skin with the last remnants of December's *Margazhi* mist; sugarcanes were everywhere, and the aroma of ghee wafted through the breeze.

A vibrant group of *Karakattam* dancers twirled and whirled around them, filling the atmosphere with music and movement. She walked west until she reached the tower topped with a gold

*kalasam* and recalled praying with folded hands and a bowed head to Goddess Raja Rajeswari at the temple. Murals depicting gods, goddesses, and scenes from Hindu epics adorned the walls beautifully. This temple was built specifically within the palace for royal worship; though they prayed and performed *pujas* to the goddess there, it remained open to the public in the evenings and on festival days.

Perhaps it truly was a beautiful day—a slight drizzle added to its charm. The dreamy mist softened her otherwise fiery spirit; sunlight warmed her skin while jasmine filled the air with its fragrance, enveloping everyone in happiness. The enchanting music of *nadaswaram* captivated her attention as she noticed musicians' eyes widen upon spotting sweet *pongal* offerings left before the goddess. The bridal party entered the *durbar* hall where they were welcomed to take their seats on ornate chairs while musicians remained back at the temple premises. Colorful paintings adorned the dome-shaped ceilings of the *durbar* hall.

Her thoughts drifted deeper into the labyrinth of her own identity. Though she was now a proud mother, the journey to motherhood had been fraught with challenges. Twenty-three years felt like an eternity—too long to remain without a child. They could have chosen adoption, yet they persisted in their attempts. Whispers surrounded her constantly; behind the walls, beneath the balconies, along the stairways, and amidst the daily sounds of household life—how many insinuations had she endured? Even teen girls who had married just a year ago were already welcoming healthy children, sometimes even twins, while she—a queen in her prime and a woman of robust health—could not conceive at all. She had turned to herbs, prayers, and visits to shrines and holy saints, but none yielded results. Just when despair began to settle in her heart, a miracle unfolded—the long-awaited news of her pregnancy arrived. Throughout those nine months that followed, her maids tended to her every need with great care.

"Lunch is served." A female attendant whispered to the rani, who nodded at Muthu; a male attendant repeated the same to the king. Rani Velu felt fatigued yet radiated excitement as large banana leaves were unfurled over tables in the dining hall adjacent to the ceremony hall. A select group of royals and nobles awaited their meal in the royal dining hall, where tables overflowed with silver plates, except for those of the raja and rani, who dined from gold plates. Male servants hurried with platters containing over a hundred vegetarian dishes, standing ready to offer more helpings to the royals.

That day, choultries within the palace and throughout the towns provided lavish lunches with special sweet dishes for pilgrims journeying to Rameswaram; these meals were always complimentary. Translucent light reflections from colored glass embellishing the windows danced across the dark teak wood dining table, creating a spectrum of colors reminiscent of a rainbow. Despite the drafty air, beads of sweat formed on Rani Velu's forehead. She had to mash her food thoroughly with her fingers, mindful of her digestive weakness during this postpartum period.

In the intense siesta that followed, Rani Velu slipped into a blissful, deep sleep, stirred only by the lively chatter of men drifting from the direction of the court hall. Among the voices, she recognized Muthu's booming laughter—no doubt fueled by the fruit wines. A variety of fruity and floral concoctions—*Pizhi, Theral, Aravu, and Kal*—were circulating in small clay pots in anticipation of a grand dinner featuring meat, prawns, and crabs. He had risen early from the afternoon siesta, and Rani Velu knew this festive jamboree would continue long into the night. The oil for the earthen lamps would need to be replenished until dawn, further inflating the already high household expenses.

Returning from the window, she sleepily made her way to the dressing table, pausing briefly to gaze at her daughter, who lay peacefully asleep. A quiet glance through the flaps of the silken tent on the gold crib reassured her that the heir was nestled under soft

silk sheets, dark curls gently swaying in the light breeze. The wet nurse rose with a deferential air, but Rani Velu gestured for her to remain still. She turned towards the antechamber to sit down and enjoy a tumbler of buttermilk garnished with coriander leaves and ginger. As she lifted the silver tumbler to take a sip, she noticed a maid enter with her head bowed low.

"Your Majesty, the king requests your presence at the pavilion after dinner," she said, her head bowed in deference. Rani Velu quickly scratched out a note of acceptance on a piece of cloth parchment with the nib of her peacock feather quill and dismissed the maid with a wave of her hand.

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The high roof, tiled with sunburnt clay to combat the summer heat, was supported by four granite pillars that gleamed under the moonlight, providing an added chill to the air. As Velu leaned against one of the pillars, pearls from her side bun swayed gently in the breeze, which wrapped around her like a refreshing embrace, chasing away the remnants of warmth from the setting sun. The full moon cast its silvery beam upon the polished floor, enhancing its luster while slow-moving clouds drifted lazily across the sky, infusing the atmosphere with a sense of tranquility and security.

A maid approached, offering warm saffron milk in a delicate gold tumbler. "No," Velu replied with a smile.

Her senior attendant, Kuyili, presented a tiny piece of parchment and leaned in to whisper in her ear. Until a decade ago, Kuyili had lived in a communal dwelling beyond the fort's walls. Rani Velu held a special affection for the girl, having watched her grow from childhood.

Now, at fifteen, Kuyili possessed an unremarkable appearance that faded into the background; yet her fiery eyes revealed an unwavering loyalty that compelled her to keep them cast downward. With a slim and agile frame, she could navigate any situation with ease. As a child, she often accompanied her farmer father to the

palace; he was granted access to the royal quarters as he was their spy. They lived within the servant quarters of the palace.

Raja Muthu arrived, his brisk energy evident in his swift strides, while his personal bodyguards, Periya Maruthu and Chinna Maruthu, maintained a respectful distance. He had opted for a simple cotton *veshti* instead of the heavy-bordered one he had worn during the ceremony, yet the brocade turban still adorned his head. Unlike the barefoot steps he had taken in the religious ceremony hall, he now wore palace shoes with pointed tips.

"You look fresh and ready to work despite all the drinking." Rani Velu shot him a teasing glance as she gracefully settled onto the stone seat, her hand resting on the cool pillar while she adjusted the silk shawl draped across her arms.

"Ha!" Raja Muthu replied, deflecting her mockery with a smile that radiated familiarity. "You look just as beautiful as when I first laid eyes on you," he added, giving her cheek a gentle pat. But, the next instant, his demeanor shifted. "Unfortunately, we need to be not only alert but also energetic and sharp at all times. If I fail in this regard, others will seize the opportunity to attack and destroy us," he said, his eyes dimming momentarily. His expression tightened, and he gripped the pillar firmly with both hands.

"I know, but perhaps you should take intermittent rests as well."

"That is easier said than done." He took a long stride and settled into the seat opposite hers, his wrist resting on his knee as he fixed his gaze intently on her. "A messenger has arrived from the Arcot Nawab, demanding revenues."

Rani Velu's half-smile faded into a frown. "Was he a tall Muslim man wearing Pashtun headgear?" The practice of dispatching couriers to minor kings for revenue collection was relentless.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Kuyili."

"Hmm." Raja Muthu's expression softened slightly.

"At least we finally have an heir. No one can take the kingdom so easily—not even the cunning Wallajah," she said, reassuringly. Raja Muthu's face softened further.

A decade earlier, when the Thanjavur Raja launched an attack and annexed Hanumanthakudi, the Sethu Rajas had turned to the Nawab for help. However, their pleas yielded no results. A few years later, the Sethu Rajas united and successfully reclaimed Hanumanthakudi.

Now, new reports indicated that the Thanjavur Raja was amassing his troops once more for another assault. So, Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga had once again approached the Nawab in recent weeks with their grievances. Whether the Nawab had instructed the Thanjavur Raja to avoid engaging with the Sethu kings or not, one fact remained clear: they were ordered to pay tributes. If they weren't settling accounts with the Thanjavur Raja, they were obliged to pay Wallajah, the Arcot Nawab. While that might have been acceptable under normal circumstances, it was an exorbitant amount—fifty times over what was standard? To further intimidate them into compliance, the Nawab had enlisted an English mercenary army—paid thugs, at his disposal.

Being a vassal's vassal was a precarious position. The Nawab exerted pressure on the Thanjavur Raja, who in turn imposed his will on the Sethu Rajas. While it was true that the Thanjavur Raja had once aided the Sethu Rajas in reclaiming their territories, that support had long since faded, though the Sethu Rajas had consistently fulfilled their obligations. However, the current Thanjavur Raja relentlessly harassed them, likely due to the Sethus' flourishing trade relations with the Dutch rather than with the English.

Previously, it was the Madurai king who harassed them. The Nayakar Kings of Madurai sought to suppress the Sethu Rajas and so formed an alliance with the Portuguese. Now, it was the Thanjavur king posing a threat. Earlier, the Sethu kingdoms' trade

had flourished, but now the Dutch were withdrawing and losing ground to the English.

During Muthu's maternal grandfather's reign over Ramanathapuram, the Dutch trade had begun. Sethu Naadu, with its long coastline and port towns, played a crucial role in the booming commerce. The Dutch aimed to dominate the waters between India and Ceylon; Sethu Naadu controlled the primary passage between these shores. As a result, the Dutch forged agreements that obligated the Sethu kings to limit access for other European traders in return for revenues and customs duties.

Valuable commodities such as arecanuts, pepper, and conch shells were transported along these routes. During times of famine and drought, the Dutch collected slaves for transport to plantations throughout Southeast Asia—a practice that both the Sethupathys and Thanjavur kings swiftly abolished. When the Dutch monopolized pearl fishing along the Ramanathapuram coasts, they offered a share of revenues from this lucrative venture. Skilled local divers procured precious pearls while mercenaries hired by the Dutch managed operations involving these divers. A thriving industry developed on the Sethu coasts; however, those days were long over.

Now, conflict raged among the Dutch, French, and English as they vied for control over lands, coasts, and seas essential for trade dominance. The Portuguese had already been expelled from these territories; now it was time for the Dutch to face a similar fate. Numerous battles followed and alliances shifted frequently. The outcome: complete expulsion of the Dutch from competition, leaving only the English and French standing firm in their ambitions. Only a handful of Dutch forts remained operational, contributing minimal revenue amidst this shifting landscape.

"Was it a mistake to have appealed to the Nawab?" Raja Muthu mused, his brow furrowing in thought. A tense silence enveloped the room, and the rani remained silent.

Just then, Thandavaraya Pillai stepped inside. Raja Muthu affectionately addressed him as Appa, honoring his years of wisdom

and experience. The raja held him close to his heart, cherishing their bond like that of a father and son. Appa had an uncanny ability to discern when to speak up and when to engage in battle; many bloody conflicts had been avoided thanks to his insightful foresight.

"May I offer my thoughts?" Appa inquired gently.

"Of course, Appa; I eagerly await your counsel," replied the raja.

"Let's send an advance portion of the revenue dues immediately to avoid incurring the Nawab's wrath. If we delay, he may unleash the English army upon us," the minister warned.

A wave of confusion swept through the room.

He went on, "At present, my informants tell me that the Nawab is preoccupied with other kingdoms; he might hesitate to engage his forces against us. Moving down south wouldn't be wise for him at this moment. However, he could still employ the English against us."

A heavy silence hung in the air.

"I agree," Rani Velu Nachiyar remarked after a moment's contemplation.

"But if we yield now, they will only continue to raise their revenue demands," Periya Maruthu interjected fiercely. "We should confront them head-on!" He bellowed.

The Maruthu brothers, Periya Maruthu and Chinna Maruthu, were endowed with traits that starkly contrasted with Appa's. Their instinctive response to any situation was to prepare for battle, yet their loyalty to the king ran deep. Emerging from humble beginnings, they had entered the palace at a tender age. The younger brother served as an assistant, cracking betel nuts, while the elder trained the Mandai dogs for battle. Both were eventually appointed as *sherogars*, military servants who ascended to become the personal bodyguards and military chief of the king.

Generally amiable in nature, they could quickly become furious when it came to matters involving the king and his household. Both brothers were formidable wrestlers; Chinna was slightly fairer and

taller than Periya, but Periya was the stronger one, able to take on ten men simultaneously and emerge victorious. He required no one for protection and chose to live alone without any bodyguards by his side.

"Calm yourself, my son," the raja said, his voice steady. "This is precisely why I prefer you remain outside these discussions."

"The Nawab and the English form a dangerous partnership, dangerous to us. While one is crafty, the other is greedy. With the slightest pretext, they would swoop down upon us and attack peaceful kingdoms. Therefore, as a first step, we must send some pagodas and gifts to Wallajah to appease him," Appa insisted.

"Not every issue can be resolved through warfare. We should start with a policy. Is it not said: *sama, dana, bheda, danda*?" The rani interjected.

"Yes. Words, gifts, alliances, and ultimately, punishment," Appa clarified.

"Very well. That is settled. We shall follow Appa's counsel; this is not our first encounter with such challenges," proclaimed the king.

"For the time being," Appa interjected.

"For the time being," Rani Velu and Raja Muthu echoed together.

Appa clapped his hands twice, summoning an attendant. "Bring forth the palm-leaf scribe and the reviewers."

Seated on the pavilion, the raja declared, "The Sivaganga kingdom has consented to pay two thousand pagodas as part of the revenue payment. Please accept these precious gifts from us for you and the princes." The palm-leaf scribe hurriedly inscribed the words with his quill. Once the reviewers had examined the manuscript, it was transcribed onto parchment and sealed with the impression of the raja's signet ring. The manuscript was securely locked away in the treasury and records room adjacent to the king's chamber, while the parchment was entrusted to a messenger.

"What about the rest?" Rani Velu inquired.

"Our diplomats will persuade the Nawab to reduce the payment. They will present our accounts and convince him to accept the remainder in installments," Appa replied.

"At what intervals?" she pressed.

"That will depend on our harvests, rainfall, and revenues from Dutch trade," Appa explained. The rani looked puzzled.

"Don't worry, my child. The Nawab will understand," he reassured.

Periya and Chinna Maruthu's scowls remained firmly etched on their faces, yet the rani's tender, motherly gaze seemed to soothe them. Raja Muthu rose gracefully from his seat. "Are you not coming to see our little princess, Vellachi?" The rani inquired.

"Of course, I will," he replied, "but that has to wait; I still have some business to wrap up. Besides, I doubt our little one would enjoy the smell of fruit wine," he added with a playful wink. "I'll visit her tomorrow during the day." Disappointment flickered across Rani Velu's features.

"You looked so regal and beautiful today; everyone admired you," Raja Muthu continued, placing his palm gently on her shoulders. Her expression softened, radiating warmth as others averted their gazes modestly.

Rani Velu watched Raja Muthu leave, turning at a smaller wooden door that led to the *anthapuram*—the queens' wing—and waved a cheerful goodbye. After some time, her ladies-in-waiting arrived, and the rani strode purposefully towards her quarters in the queens' wing, her heart brimming with deep contentment.

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Raja Muthu's personal attendant gently tapped the iron chain against the thick wooden door at the end of the passage leading to the queens' quarters. A latch slid back, and a maid opened the heavy door for him and his royal master, bowing her head as she stepped aside.

In the hall, they heard the sound of rushing anklets, and a young woman appeared, bowed low, and animatedly gestured for their royal guest to enter. He approached a chair and sat down while she crouched beside him on her knees.

“Maharaja!” she exclaimed, her lips parting in a radiant smile. He stood up and embraced her passionately. “You are as sweet as milk pudding,” he said fondly.

“I never thought you would make it here tonight,” she whispered softly. “Gauri, didn’t you marry me with Rani Velu’s blessings?” he replied teasingly. She blushed deeply at his words.

"That makes you my second queen; you are also my love, aren’t you?" He said, pressing her against the wall and kissing her warm lips with fervor. She let out a soft giggle. Taking the lantern, Gauri led Raja Muthu into the bed chamber. By the time they finished, the wick was flickering low; Raja Muthu rose to leave.

"Shall I bring you some warm milk?" Gauri asked.

"No, my dear. I have important work to attend to."

"At this hour?"

"The Arcot Nawab has sent an emissary demanding taxes. I need to arrange two thousand gold pagoda coins as an advance payment to appease them."

"Oh, that’s a huge amount," she replied.

"There’s more to come," Raja Muthu said through clenched teeth.

After a moment of silence, she pleaded, "Please take all my jewelry."

Raja Muthu laughed lightly at her offer. "It is a bottomless pit, this revenue demand," he sighed.

"What does *akka* Rani say?"

"As of now, we have an heir, and there is no immediate threat of usurpation. By the way, why don’t you give me another child?" Raja Muthu gazed at her affectionately.

"We've discussed this before, haven't we? I cannot betray *akka*; after all, she was the one who united us in marriage after witnessing our love. She could have easily banished me from the kingdom. I am forever grateful to her and promised that I wouldn't bear any children."

Raja Muthu nodded, unable to shake the memory of being caught in Gauri's lap in the garden. Rani Velu had traveled to the Kollangudi palace—her summer retreat—and was returning unexpectedly that day. Spotting his horse tied to a tree along the path, she dismounted from her palanquin. After questioning his personal attendant, she learned that the raja was resting there. Little did she realize that this rest involved another woman.

For weeks, the rani remained upset, avoiding him and immersing herself in painting and writing poems about love's pangs and betrayal. Eventually, she found the strength to accept Gauri and her presence. Instead of relegating her to the empty harem quarters, she elevated her status by marrying her to her own husband at the Raja Rajeswari temple within the palace grounds. From that moment on, Gauri Nachiyar became part of the royal household, treated with due respect.

On the day of Rani Velu's labor, Gauri moved actively around the room, wetting pieces of cloth in warm water and gently massaging her as she cried out in pain. She offered comfort throughout the night, assisting the elderly midwife during the long labor. Once their daughter was born, Gauri bathed her and checked on her health while Rani Velu succumbed to exhaustion in sleep. That day, however, Gauri chose to step back so that all attention would fall solely on Rani Velu.

The dark night of the Tamil month of *Thai* lingered, far from the promise of dawn. Raja Muthu resisted the temptation to steal a few hours of sleep, leaning down to press a gentle kiss on Gauri's forehead as he bid her farewell. He needed to gather the tax money from his treasury. As he made his way towards his quarters, anxiety crept in, overshadowing his thoughts: even if he

successfully collected the advance payment, how would he manage the remaining balance? The answer eluded him. With this worry occupying his mind, everyone else—his young heir, baby Vellachi included—faded into the background.

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# *Kalaiyarkoil Fort, Sivaganga Kingdom, 1772*

The gentle breeze of *Masi*, the Tamil month spanning mid-February to mid-March, danced playfully with the saffron flag that fluttered majestically atop the ramparts of the Sivaganga palace. The flag depicted Hanuman, the monkey god, hoisting the Sanjivani mountain aloft, a bold testament to the lineage of the Sivaganga Kings—descendants of the Sethupathys, appointed centuries ago by Emperor Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara to safeguard Rameswaram and its pilgrims.

Although dawn had just broken, the armory and its adjoining chambers buzzed with activity as the Maruthu men hurried about. Cannonballs were stacked in neat piles on the ground while metal-tipped bamboo pikes hung from hooks on the walls alongside an array of swords and daggers. Chinna Maruthu stood tall and strikingly handsome, slightly exceeding his brother Periya Maruthu in stature—a stark contrast to his name. Both sported thick mustaches curled upward, yet Periya exuded a more formidable presence than his younger sibling.

Dressed in a white *veshti* that hugged his legs snugly, Chinna scrutinized a *valari*—a crescent-shaped boomerang forged from iron in meticulous molds. With practiced ease, he grasped its rounded end and sent it flying towards an exercise target; it sliced through with precision.

Outside in the palace backyard, soldiers engaged in various exercises: some wrestled with oiled bodies glistening under the sun, others performed push-ups or swung heavy wooden clubs overhead while a few others focused on fitness routines. Periya spun a club with such speed that no one could match him.

Suddenly, the back door swung open as a group of farmers entered. Chinna turned to the soldiers with clear instructions: train them on all weapons available, assess their skills thoroughly, and guide them towards their strengths. Selecting several sharp-eyed youths from among them, he handed each a *valari*. “You’ll learn how to wield our lethal weapon,” he announced confidently. One eager boy dashed forward to set up wooden stick targets topped with pots that represented heads.

Chinna seized a *valari* and hurled it at a target with a spin. The other youngsters watched in awe as it struck home perfectly. “You can also spin it vertically or horizontally,” Chinna explained enthusiastically. “Aim for the neck; but if you wish your opponent alive, target their legs or knees instead.”

“Is there a war?” one boy asked hesitantly.

Chinna erupted into hearty laughter that echoed off the stone walls. “Why? Are you frightened?” His voice boomed playfully.

The boy felt foolish as embarrassment crept onto his face. Sensing it, Chinna's demeanor softened momentarily as a fatherly feeling surged within him. “No need for fear,” he reassured gently while giving the boy’s shoulder an encouraging pat.

“I heard all forts across our kingdom are training boys from nearby areas for battle,” continued the boy earnestly.

Chinna raised an eyebrow curiously at this revelation. “How did you come by that information?”

"My cousin, who returned home yesterday, shared the news with me. He hails from Aranthangi, a fort located in the border regions."

"It's merely the border forts," Chinna reassured him. "Don't worry."

"Sire, I would gladly sacrifice my life for our revered Raja and his kingdom. I am eager to learn everything necessary to achieve victory. Please teach me," the boy implored.

A glimmer of pride sparkled in Chinna's eyes. "Now, that's my boy."

Chinna offered them more advice as their training started.

Among the numerous forts scattered throughout the kingdom, Kalaiyarkoil, Tirupathur, Aranthangi, Nattarasankottai, Kottaiyur, and the grand Sivaganga palace stood out for their impressive construction and vastness; Kalaiyarkoil served as the king's formidable stronghold.

A short distance from the palace lay a settlement of approximately three hundred bladesmith families who forged weapons not only for the Sivaganga palace but also for its forts. Most of these men, hailing from the ancient ironsmith clans of the Vijayanagara Empire, spoke in Telugu and held little esteem in the eyes of others; yet, their loyalty to the king remained steadfast and indisputable. They made axes, sickles, spears, pikes, and even cannonballs. Some Maravar youths proudly carried bows and arrows fashioned by these artisans to the training grounds. Each had been instructed to consume rice gruel, buttermilk, raw shallots, and generous portions of meat from the palace kitchens for breakfast or whenever hunger struck. Chinna spotted a few boys stealing meat intended for dogs; he gestured for them to come over and generously shared his own food with them.

As the field exercises continued, a group of rugged youngsters was summoned to act as targets for the *valari* experts in a new drill. Each boy received a body-length shield for protection. The *valari* experts unleashed a flurry of attacks, spinning and darting in all directions. Most of the boys toppled over but emerged unscathed, as the *valaris* were merely dummies. The intention behind the relentless barrage was to knock the wind out of them, and it certainly succeeded. Boomerangs flew from every angle, striking

with precision; despite their shields, the punch bags buckled and collapsed, their confidence evaporating like mist as they fell to the ground like scattered straws. Chinna observed the scene with admiration for the experts—after all, he had meticulously trained them himself. He turned to the young trainees and said, "Watch and learn; watch and learn."

At the far end of the yard, Periya grappled with a muscular bodybuilder. A lively crowd encircled them, their glistening skin reflecting the sun as they cheered enthusiastically from either side. In a swift motion, the bodybuilder found himself on his back, signaling the end of their match. Periya triumphantly waved his arms, calling for more challengers to step up; he demanded at least ten opponents to face him. Within moments, his next adversaries went sprawling in all directions.

Dripping with sweat, Periya made his way through the yard and into the palace grounds, exiting through the gates to quench his thirst with coconut water from nearby stalls. By the time he finished, a dozen coconuts had disappeared along with some refreshing water splashed across his face. Eager to return and continue the training, he dashed barefoot back to the yard, leaving his sandals behind for a retainer to collect later. Suddenly, he spotted an ornate palanquin being carried by bearers who hummed in rhythmic harmony. Inside was their ambassador returning from Arcot. It was midmorning when training wrapped up, and a few youngsters lingered behind, playing games as a cool *Masi* breeze swept through, offering relief from the heat of summer days.

A tempest was brewing; Periya could sense it deep within his gut. Just that morning, a crow had cawed from its perch on the palace gates—an unusually early visit. Such irregular cawing signaled the arrival of guests, nature's way of delivering a warning, an omen. The other day, when Periya had climbed to the tower to inspect the guards, he noticed that the boiled rice set out for the crows—their ancestors—lay untouched; this was not a good sign.

The familiar horse-drawn coach belonging to Appa stood waiting on the porch. While it didn't bode well for others, it stirred something in Periya. He pondered how long it had been since he last fought; not since the war with Madurai, he recalled. It was about time.

An attendant bowed deeply. "His Majesty has summoned you and your brother to the pavilion." With a swift gesture, Periya signaled for Chinna to join him, then turned towards the stables, veering left to enter the pavilion through a discreet side entrance.

Inside, Appa sat alongside the ambassador and the king, who regarded them with an expectant gaze. "How go the preparations?" he inquired. Both brothers exchanged puzzled glances. "How is the training progressing?" he clarified.

"Very well, Your Majesty," Chinna replied earnestly. "We are enlisting farmers and young men eager to fight; their enthusiasm is our motivation."

The king paused before asking, "Are the routine regimental exercises proceeding smoothly?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," they answered in unison.

"Set up the barracks and stockpile both men and ammunition in our forts. We require no fewer than two hundred soldiers at each fort and five hundred at those along the border, especially in the north. Additionally, Kollungudi Palace and Kalaiyarkoil Fort will need another five hundred men, as will this palace."

"Sire, are we anticipating war?" one of them asked cautiously.

"Wallajah is preparing to dispatch an army to Sivaganga," came the king's dry response. "Instruct the fifty *palayakkarars* in our kingdom to each send a minimum of two hundred men. Don't we repeat this same drill every other year?" Disgust tinged his voice.

"We will confront them, Your Majesty. We vow to eliminate every last one of their soldiers," they growled resolutely. "We'll gather at least ten thousand soldiers within ten days—just as we did before."

“Yes, yes, my sons; I am aware,” said the king with a nod as his gaze drifted towards the ambassador.

“Then shall we halt diplomatic discussions?” asked the ambassador hesitantly.

“We will pursue both ways,” Appa interjected confidently.

Now it was the ambassador's turn to look bewildered.

“Arcot manages both—preparing for war while maintaining diplomacy; it's quite typical of them,” remarked the king with a smirk. “Our spies at Arcot’s court have witnessed everything and reported accordingly.”

Beaming with excitement, the brothers requested permission from the king to leave so they could start the preparations immediately.

Turning to the ambassador, the king asked with a self-satisfied smirk, "So, what’s the latest demand?"

"Fifty thousand pagodas," he replied.

"What? Has the Nawab lost his senses?"

"Sire, the Nawab has pledged our kingdom for one lakh pagodas. With a monthly interest rate of four percent, the annual payment totals fifty thousand pagodas."

The king sank into his chair with a heavy thud. Even Appa was shaken.

"Outrageous!" roared the king, his voice echoing through the pavilion and thickening the already tense air. "Who does the Nawab think he is to mortgage my kingdom?"

"Calm down, sire," Appa said gently, trying to soothe him. "We are vassals of the Thanjavur Raja, who in turn serves as a subordinate to the Nawab."

"Those days are long gone, Appa. The Thanjavur Raja is no longer his vassal, nor are we bound to him. The Nawab was weak; he could never enforce these taxes upon us. Just a decade or two

ago, there was no question of paying tributes to either the raja or the Nawab." His voice thundered with indignation.

"That's true," Appa conceded. "The Nawab's forces were crippled. He couldn't impose such injustices on either us or the raja. For over a century, we have enjoyed our independence just as much as the Thanjavur Rajas did. We offered tributes only because he aided in establishing our kingdom—that's all."

Silence enveloped them as the king anticipated Appa's next words.

"But now we face a harsh new reality, one marked by British complicity," Appa continued gravely. "Not only have they lent substantial sums to the Nawab at usurious interest rates, but they also provide military support armed with superior weaponry. To my knowledge, six years ago, he was already drowning in debts exceeding twenty-two lakh pagodas."

"So what?" retorted the king dismissively.

"It matters because of their influence; they've ensnared him deep in debt that grows each year—he's at their mercy now. If he cannot meet payments, he'll send them after our lands."

"That is his problem," growled the king defiantly.

"Regrettably, we cannot afford to overlook this situation," Appa warned firmly. "If we refuse to comply with their demands, we may find ourselves facing them—the British."

"So he's resorted to hiring mercenary rogues now?" bellowed the king angrily.

"Your Majesty," Appa urged calmly, "this is not a moment for emotional outbursts. We must devise a clever plan."

Turning to the ambassador, the king inquired, "How did you uncover such intimate details about our kingdom's pledges?"

"I bribed men in the records room, sire. They revealed that the pledging parchments were drawn up recently, though the Nawab's son had been urging his father to pay attention to our kingdom for the past two years," he replied.

"We sent them two thousand pagodas as an advance when the princess was born," the king recalled. "Before that, we often disregarded the Nawab's messengers," he reminisced with a resigned chuckle. "Should we send the remaining sum that we believed was correct three years ago and resolve this matter once and for all?" The king asked rapidly.

"Let us not act in haste, sire. We need to deliberate on this matter. Let's sleep on it," Appa suggested calmly.

"Our net revenues barely cover two-thirds of that outrageous sum they demand! It is cruel and unjust to ask for such an amount," the king lamented.

"Please, sire," Appa urged gently. "We will find a solution as we always do. Have faith." He took a moment to pat the king's back; after all, he had watched him grow from a mischievous child who delighted in pranks into a ruler faced with daunting challenges. Yet this was no time for nostalgia or sorrow. The issue loomed large before them, demanding immediate attention and strategic thinking. Appa found himself lost in contemplation.

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Before dawn the following day, Raja Muthu woke up. He prepared himself and made his way to the pavilion, where he recalled the statecraft of Chanakya, the revered *Rajaguru* of the ancient Maurya king: a ruler should meet with diplomats either in the early morning hours or late at night. Appa bowed deeply to the king, followed by several other men in attendance.

"My Lord," one of them spoke up, his voice barely above a whisper. "We were unable to meet with Umdat-al-Umara, the Arcot Prince. He was not present in Arcot, so, regrettably, we could not persuade him to reconsider his unfavorable stance towards us." The spy's gaze fell to the ground as he added softly, "We apologize." The raja dismissed them not so much with anger as with a sense of disappointment.

"How much are we receiving from the Dutch in tolls?" he asked.

"About twenty-five thousand pagodas, Your Majesty," Appa replied.

"Aren't we fulfilling our end of the treaty by ensuring safe passage for their areca nut and pepper trades?" questioned the raja.

"Yes, my lord," Appa acknowledged. "But their trading activities are declining; they're losing strength"

"Hmm," mused the raja. "In my father's time, when he ruled, the Sethupathis held sway over Dutch trade routes. The Dutch were insatiable; they sought monopoly over our ports and sea lanes connecting Ceylon—a lucrative path that we couldn't allow any single entity to dominate. They never grasped this and often instigated quarrels." After a moment's pause, he continued, "Yet they paid handsomely for it all back then. Now everything is dwindling."

"Please don't lose heart, Your Majesty," Appa urged gently.

"How do you expect us to pay fifty thousand pagodas when our total revenues from customs duties and agriculture barely reach that amount? If we surrender all our earnings to them—what will be left for our expenses? They are draining us dry!" The raja's voice rose in frustration.

A heavy silence enveloped them.

"Didn't we offer the English similar terms as those given to the Dutch for trade route protection?" asked the raja.

"Yes, my lord," Appa confirmed. "But they declined."

"I recall inviting Colonel Heron for discussions; initially he seemed receptive but later sent back a brief note dismissing our proposal," said Raja Muthu.

"The trade route is immensely valuable," Appa noted sadly. "But the English remain loyal to the Nawab."

"The Dutch are withdrawing too. Their contribution will soon dwindle down to nothing. If we somehow manage to pay this year's taxes owed to the Nawab, what about next year? Our revenues could be halved as well," lamented Raja Muthu.

Appa remained silent.

"What is this four times monthly interest rate? I've never encountered such an exorbitant charge before!" The king's tone turned whiny with distress.

Appa interjected calmly. "My lord, this is merely a tactic designed to initiate their campaign of annexation." His words resonated ominously in Raja Muthu's ears. Removing his crown with deliberate care, he placed it on his seat before sinking down beside it with a weary thud while running his fingers through his hair. Eventually, he cradled his head in his hands and closed his eyes tightly against mounting worries.

Appa looked at him with a deep sense of empathy; two decades on the throne had clearly left their mark on this seasoned king. Even his formidable strength was beginning to wilt under the unyielding strain—the weight of ensuring his subjects' well-being while battling unreasonable tax demands was gradually enervating him.

Worry could consume even the mightiest warrior, gnawing at him like a relentless bookworm. Long ago, as an eager young man, Raja Muthu had envisioned transforming his kingdom into a vibrant and flourishing realm, but that dream faded amidst the endless conflicts with neighboring states. Sometimes, even peacetime filled him with unease, for he always sensed that schemes were brewing in the shadows, unpredictable and dangerous.

Yet his people revered him; they understood his plight all too well. His efforts—digging wells, constructing dams and tanks, erecting choultries for the poor, consecrating temples, securing borders, maintaining law and order—along with depleting his treasury for their benefit had not gone unnoticed. Their loyalty to the king was unwavering. Whenever called upon to defend their land, even farmers rallied to join the army without hesitation.

The Maravar men were a unique breed; they claimed descent from Guha, the boatman who ferried Lord Rama to Ceylon. These military leaders held their king in high esteem, referring to him as

Thevar, probably a variation of the Sanskrit term, Deva. Well-built and strong, darker-skinned than many in their community, they exuded fearlessness and awe.

Yet like Abhimanyu ensnared in the Chakravyuha formation, the king felt a restless turmoil within himself. Encircling his kingdom were familiar adversaries: Pudukkottai Thondaiman, Thanjavur Raja, Madurai Nayakar, and the Nawab—a chaotic landscape where alliances shifted constantly as rivals sought to undermine one another or forge new partnerships against common foes. The most troubling aspect was that these alignments were as fluid as shifting sands; goals changed just as easily as allegiances did.

"Tirunelveli has been ordered to deliver seventy-two thousand pagodas in revenue," Appa said, his voice steady as he tried to soothe the king, who remained silent.

"After my father's passing, I never anticipated that this revenue issue would haunt me for the rest of my days," the king lamented. "The Nawab surely recognizes our bravery and strength. He wouldn't dare provoke us into war, or so I believed. How many of those messengers from the Nawab have been dismissed empty-handed? Do you recall, Appa?" Appa nodded in agreement.

"We didn't even acknowledge them. It was only two years ago, during my daughter's naming ceremony, that we made an advance payment out of a sense of goodwill. If it hadn't been for that occasion, I wouldn't have felt inclined to be so generous. This Nawab is pushing it too far," the king rued.

"We did make occasional payments during your father's reign, but mostly to the Thanjavur Raja. I can't recall any direct requests from the Nawab," Appa replied thoughtfully. "It's only in these last two years that we've successfully evaded him."

"We paid reasonable sums to the Thanjavur Raja without hesitation. When he attempted to impose higher demands, we simply ignored him; even if he had declared war and defeated us once, we managed to reclaim our lands and defend ourselves

effectively," the king reassured him with confidence. A wave of relief washed over Appa.

"Our refusal continued with the Nawab as well; however, we were less confrontational with him than we were with the Thanjavur Raja," Appa added cautiously.

"So what's causing this new anxiety? Is it the British?" The king pondered aloud.

"Yes, my lord. It is indeed the British; yet our military prowess surpasses theirs significantly. They possess only two advantages: discipline and modern weaponry. But they lack true courage—without their arms, they couldn't even confront a man; they'd flee like frightened rats."

"For us, instilling discipline in our soldiers is achievable; but what about the ammunition part?" The king asked.

"We may need to forge an alliance," suggested Appa. After a moment's thought, his face brightened. But, from what I've heard, their firearms are subpar—too many bullets needed just to take down one man! The Dutch also operate factories at Tharangambadi where they produce gunpowder. Before they leave these shores, we could place a significant order for weapons and artillery units as well—they could also train our Maravar soldiers," he proposed eagerly.

"That would take considerable time, Appa—but starting now is essential." The room fell silent for a moment.

"I still harbor concerns," said the king finally. "Don't you recall last year when we ignored the Nawab's demands? He then requested our men to join his forces in battle alongside his army; we complied—and our *valari*-wielding Maravars contributed greatly to his victory! He was thrilled then but has turned against us now—betrayed us within a year. Unbelievable, a stab in the back!" exclaimed the raja.

"My lord," Appa interjected gently, "I believe it's prudent to extend some grace to the Nawab here. The new entrant, the prince, seems more cunning than his father ever was; right now, it's difficult for us to fathom his intentions."

Relieved that perhaps it wasn't entirely the Nawab after all, the king considered Appa's different perception thoughtfully before responding quietly after a pause: "You may be onto something there; perhaps I've taken offense unnecessarily at the Nawab."

"Your Majesty," Appa cautioned earnestly, "we know how to navigate dealings with the Nawab and present our case effectively—but this elusive prince presents an entirely different challenge altogether and might influence the Nawab in unforeseen ways. Predicting his schemes will be an arduous work indeed! For now, we must acknowledge that war looms on our horizon; preparation is key, but equally important will be our efforts towards a diplomatic truce."

◆

Dawn illuminated the palace, casting a soft glow over its grand facade. Maidservants busily swept the entrance, their brooms whispering against the stone as they sprinkled water to freshen the air. With careful precision, they drew intricate *kolams* from rice flour—a cherished morning ritual meant to welcome Goddess Lakshmi into their homes. The cooks shouted, "Caw, Caw," beckoning the crows to a small pile of food laid out on the terrace, paying tribute to the ancestors before they started serving others. A female attendant glided towards the pavilion, balancing two tumblers of milk: one made of gold for the king and another in silver for the minister.

"Where is the rani?" the king inquired, his brow furrowing with concern. "Your Majesty, the rani is practicing *silambam* with Kuyili and several other women by the elephant stable," replied the attendant, bowing slightly. "Tell her to come to me at once," commanded the king.

"Isn't she remarkable? She resumed her training just a month after giving birth. Most would wait at least three months before even thinking about moving again," he added with admiration. "Indeed, my lord. the rani is a master of martial arts; I've never seen anyone as agile and adept," Appa chimed in.

With her *saree* neatly tucked at her hip and a sturdy bamboo stick gripped firmly in hand, the rani approached gracefully and bowed deeply. "My dear, we face an urgent issue—a renewed tax demand of fifty thousand pagodas has arisen. The Nawab's son is likely plotting war against us with British support; our diplomats were unable to change his mind." He looked at her directly. "What do you suppose?"

"Oh, so it's the prince now?" the rani responded thoughtfully before continuing, "That was to be expected."

"How so?"

"They attacked my late father's kingdom of Ramanathapuram last year and conquered it," she explained. Before she could elaborate further, the raja interjected, "To which you insisted we should not send our troops for assistance."

"Indeed, that's right. If we had tried to save Ramanathapuram, we would have landed ourselves in a precarious situation, precisely as the prince's son would have wanted us to. We would have walked right into his trap. Helping them would have resulted in heavy losses among our troops." The king lapsed into silence as she continued. "Also, if we had sent our soldiers, we would lack sufficient numbers now when we need them most, not to mention the loss of morale."

"You are so sacrificial, my dear," remarked the raja with genuine appreciation.

She smiled softly in response. "You sensed that they'd target us next." The raja nodded approvingly. "Well done; you've saved our soldiers. So what shall we do now?" he asked.

"We must continue to seek and appease the prince—he's not like his father and has the English backing him," she stated firmly as the king listened intently. "You mentioned our diplomats couldn't reach him at Arcot; then, it's crucial we ascertain his location immediately."

The king pondered this for a moment before instructing Appa, "Appa, send scouts to monitor both our borders and Arcot urgently."

After a brief pause, he asked Appa about addressing the revenue demand.

"The diplomats who failed were not our finest," Appa explained quickly. "We will send our trusted ones this time—laden with gifts—and offer one-tenth of the demand upfront to win over the Nawab's favor. I'll draft a compelling letter that will persuade him."

"In the meantime," said the rani resolutely, "I will train a female army in *silambam* and fight alongside you, my husband."

"No, my dear," he countered without hesitation. "While I appreciate your bravery immensely, I believe your place is beside our daughter—to protect our heir."

"But I worry for your safety," she protested gently.

"My loyal men will safeguard me—do not fret about that," he assured her warmly before turning back to Appa. "When are those diplomats departing?"

"Tomorrow morning, Your Majesty," Appa replied confidently. "They will carry precious stones, gold ornaments, and our renowned pearls as offerings to please the Nawab."

The Maruthu brothers received a summons, instructing them to dispatch scouts to the kingdom's borders to track the location of the Arcot prince.

"So, to summarize, our seasoned diplomats will take five thousand pagodas along with the finest gifts to the Nawab and persuade him to agree to a discounted payment at a later date. Our scouts will depart immediately to search our lands and borders for any sign of the prince. We will commence preparations for war starting today," declared the king. He stood up to leave, followed closely by the queen and Appa. That evening, several local moneylenders known as the Chettiars paid their respects to the raja, presenting cloth parchments that guaranteed payment for the full sum of five thousand pagodas.

◆

The Maruthu brothers selected their top archers and instructed them to escort the diplomats at dawn the next day. Bullock carts were loaded with gifts: yards of exquisite cotton cloth crafted by local weavers, gleaming brass and silver artifacts, as well as precious stones and pearls. The raja meticulously recorded these items in his treasury room tucked away in a corner of his private quarters.

In the palace temple, a brahmin priest rang a hand bell while swirling the family deity with a brass stand lit with twenty lamps at the Raja Rajeswari temple. The Maruthu brothers each broke open a coconut as an offering for blessings on this auspicious endeavor and prayed fervently to the goddess.

◆

"Let us prepare them all for battle," proclaimed the brothers, raising their swords high in unison. Secret couriers were dispatched throughout all villages and towns along the northern border with messages urging grocery wholesalers to have grains and pulses ready within a month; bullock cart drivers were alerted to prepare strong healthy bullocks; goatherds and poultry farmers were advised to fatten their livestock; herbal *siddha* doctors were asked to have their collections ready; weaponsmiths and bladesmiths received large orders for bows, arrows, spears, *valaris*, axes, maces, shields, and armor; horse traders were instructed to gather horses.

Coaches and chariots were oiled while old parts were repaired or refurbished. In the palace stables, sacks filled with horse gram piled up alongside elephants taken into nearby forests for extended feeding times—an adjustment from their usual routine.

The palace granary brimmed with rice and pulses; livestock was being gathered outside behind the back gates of the palace. Farmers across the kingdom segregated old or sick bullocks from healthy ones while ensuring they were well-fed before selling them off to nomadic merchants who needed them for transporting supplies alongside soldiers.

The Maruthu brothers conducted an inventory of weapons—counting both existing stock and newly added pieces—while

discussing how many would be required per soldier. Out of ten thousand men slated for mobilization, one thousand would form cavalry units. These horses came primarily from fifty *palayakkarars*—provincial chiefs—with an additional hundred sourced from royal stables. To support this force adequately, they calculated that at least five thousand bullocks would be necessary.

Every day, men, bullocks, horses, groceries, livestock, and weapons streamed into the palace. The brothers meticulously tracked each arrival, directing them to Kalaiyarkoil fort, Kollungudi palace, and the northern borders near Tiruchirapalli, which was being ruled by the Nawab. Among these destinations, Kalaiyarkoil fort and the borders held immense significance.

Following the raja's orders, they dispatched five hundred men to Kollungudi palace. They planned to send four thousand soldiers to the fort and an equal number to the borders while eagerly anticipating reinforcements from provincial chiefs. As the Tamil month of *Masi* transitioned into *Panguni* in mid-March, a shift in temperature signaled the approach of summer heat. The Maravars buzzed with excitement as their beloved Tamil New Year festival loomed closer. Fresh sprigs of Neem flowers symbolized renewed hopes for success and victory.

A formidable mass of armed men from Sivaganga palace marched eastward towards both the palace and the fort. In the distance, dawn broke over the horizon; they would reach Kollungudi palace by breakfast time and Kalaiyarkoil fort by mid-morning. To an untrained observer, it appeared as though a single entity moved forth; however, they had split into two distinct groups destined for different locations. Focused. Determined. Menacing. A larger contingent silently advanced towards the northern border forts. Leading these formations were trusted military chiefs who commanded respect. Following closely behind were bullocks loaded with war supplies while mercenaries and drivers sat hidden beneath loads of provisions, firewood, and cooking vessels. Their families trailed behind on foot—wives and children eager to

witness the unfolding events. The Maruthu brothers understood that persuading these families to stay back was futile; children's enthusiasm outweighed any concerns.

Meanwhile, tents sprang up behind the palace to accommodate a thousand armed men while makeshift earthen ovens prepared meals for them daily. Scores of *siddha* doctors made their rounds at camp every day tending to any ailments that arose among troops engaged in regular regimental exercises. Deep trenches were dug along the routes to the kingdom—from Ramanathapuram to Sivaganga and from Madurai to Kalaiyarkoil—then packed with thorny cockspur bushes and poisonous plants to form natural barriers for defense. Military posts emerged within the woods encircling the Kalaiyarkoil town.

Water was not a concern for the armies approaching the borders, as several rivers meandered through the landscape. However, what should have taken four days to traverse on foot could stretch into a week due to the rugged hills that lay ahead. The Maravars excelled in battle on flat and arid land, but their effectiveness diminished in the uneven terrain of hillocks and uplands. Nevertheless, these seasoned warriors were capable of remarkable feats. The raja had strategically dispatched an equal number of troops to both the borders and Kalaiyarkoil fort; whether an attack came at the borders or deep into his kingdom, he was prepared. Should he require reinforcements from the border forces due to dwindling numbers, they would return swiftly down the sloping border paths to the Kalaiyarkoil fort at half the time.

◆

Ramanathapuram Palace.

The *Masi* month was drawing to a close, yet the coolness of spring remained temporary and wavering. The air was thick with heat, and even the evening sun beat down relentlessly, leaving the English officers stationed in the palace feeling fatigued, sunburned, and drained.

Major General Joseph Smith lounged in an easy chair beside the palace pond, savoring the moment, when Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Bonjour burst in, executing a hurried salute. “Sir, the prince is on his way here.”

Smith exhaled slowly, irritation creeping into his voice. “What is it now?” Before he could articulate his thoughts further, the prince arrived.

Startled, Smith quickly rose, fumbling to secure the towel draped over his shoulders around his waist. “Welcome, Your Majesty,” he managed, forcing a grin.

“There is no time for pleasantries. My father has agreed to the terms set by the Sivaganga king,” Umdat declared, his voice booming with urgency and despair.

Smith gaped.

“Did I or did I not tell you to hurry up with the attack on Sivaganga? We conquered Ramanathapuram last year and imprisoned the king and his family in Trichy. Now, we might miss our chance to do the same to the king of Sivaganga.” The prince’s voice thundered. With the Nawab’s eighteen sons vying for favor, none had yet distinguished themselves in battle; perhaps if Umdat proved himself worthy, he could ascend to his father's throne. He was raring for wars to distinguish himself so that few would match his experience and triumphs on the battlefield.

Regaining his composure, the general replied, “Even if we had attacked last year, we wouldn’t have been able to subdue that king. He is a seasoned warrior, battle-hardened, and would have easily defeated us—guns or no guns.”

The prince’s discomfiture was palpable.

“Twenty years ago, King Muthu triumphed over Captain Cope, who had launched an attack on Madurai and captured the reigning king. Captain Cope was simply aiding the Nawab in his quest to conquer the city,” Smith explained.

“That was two decades ago. He might not possess the same strength now,” the prince replied dismissively.

“Not long before that, Lord Degard urged the king to settle his taxes, but he refused. So, Degard dispatched Kansahib to raid Sivaganga, only to be driven out by King Muthu,” Smith countered sharply.

“So what? This time, it’s my father, the Nawab’s demand. If fear doesn’t grip him, at least worry will,” Umdat insisted.

“That won’t serve you well, Your Majesty. What I’m trying to convey is that he remains formidable and resilient, and has a loyal circle of supporters by his side,” Smith replied firmly.

“In that case, let’s bribe someone from his inner circle to gather intelligence on his activities,” the prince suggested.

“Very well, Your Majesty. We’ve identified a couple of potential contacts. Once I have confirmation, I will inform you,” Smith assured him.

"That is not enough. Bring the maps," Umdat commanded.

Smith instructed several officers to arrange a table and fetch the maps detailing Sivaganga and its surrounding kingdoms.

"I don't know about you, but I am eager to attack," Umdat-al-Umara declared, his eyes locked on the map as he gripped the bamboo poles holding up the tent flaps tightly.

Years ago, Smith would have wholeheartedly embraced those words. Yet, after witnessing countless displays of fervent determination crumble into nothingness, he could sense the hollowness behind them. Nevertheless, he found it worthwhile to heed the impassioned prince, vibrant with youthful zeal, despite his reckless demeanor.

"Do you know that the temple at Kalaiyarkoil holds gold and jewels worth fifty thousand pagodas?" The prince's eyes sparkled with excitement as he posed the question.

Bonjour's ears perked up at this revelation. He stole a glance at Smith, whose own eyes glimmered with anticipation before shifting back to the prince. There was no denying that the East India Company was hemorrhaging money daily due to the Nawab's escalating debts. To complicate matters further, they were forced into battles dictated by whims and fancies that often left them with empty coffers while their superiors drowned their sorrows in drink. The prospect of securing gold worth fifty thousand pagodas—an amount nearly equivalent to their total tax receipts—was tantalizing; if an attack could yield such a bounty, why not hunt it?

"Fine, let us attack," Smith said. He gestured for his lieutenants to gather and plan their next steps while the prince observed as the officers maneuvered a large table into the brightly lit palace hall.

"Please come over to the hall. There is beer and champagne. Please relax while we devise our battle plan," Smith invited the prince.

In the spacious hall adorned with vibrant stained-glass windows, the evening's crimson sunlight poured in, casting colorful patterns on the polished floor. As large lamps flickered to life, smaller sconces embedded in the walls were also lit. Umdat took a sip of his champagne and interrupted the conversation between Smith, Bonjour, and the other lieutenants.

"If you believe it is not easy to overthrow this 'mighty' king, then we must resort to trickery or deceit," the prince declared, his voice rising above the murmurs.

"And what is the plan?" Smith asked, a hint of disdain creeping into his tone.

"Let us propose peace talks while we prepare to strike," the prince suggested.

Smith and Bonjour exchanged glances, their eyes brightening. "That's ingenious," Smith acknowledged.

"When we send letters to the king requesting peace talks, he will lower his guard. That's when we will launch our attack," the prince

elaborated. "To learn his strategies, we will recruit his spies, offering them bribes of land, and turn them into double agents."

Smith and Bonjour bowed respectfully to the prince, their minds racing with the possibilities.

◆

Two months drifted by; the festival of Ramanavami—the celebration of Lord Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana—was nearing. During this time, the rani and her young daughter were often seen fervently praying at the Raja Rajeswari temple. Each morning, after bathing, the rani would wrap herself in a damp saree and perform *puja* at the temple. She offered large platters filled with bananas, grapes, *sapotas*, coconuts, betel leaves, turmeric roots, and areca nuts. Prior to her arrival, the priest would purify the idol with holy water and drape it in a silk sari adorned with fragrant jasmine garlands. Oil lamps flickered softly while cubes of camphor flared brightly; temple singers raised their voices in devotional songs set to Carnatic *ragas* as she implored blessings for long life and prosperity so that her kingdom might flourish.

One spring morning, while she bowed low in prayer with her eyes closed amidst their singing:

*Upon the bosom broad of the spacious earth*

*That's bounded by the sea on whose wide face*

*The leaping waves resound, are mountains high*

*Where honeycombs abound. The wind doth blow*

As a breeze picked up around her, she joined in singing from Maduraikanchi of Sangam literature. Spring showers brought relief from warmth while paving way for gentle sunshine that felt pleasant rather than oppressive; humidity lingered far away. Flower buds began to bloom on *neem* trees nearby when a sudden gust swirled dust around palace gates as a courier dismounted his horse and approached guards with urgency. He whispered something urgent before they stepped aside for him; he had returned from Arcot.

Though unease clawed at him beneath his composed exterior, the king did not reveal it openly. Appa observed closely from his seat on the throne in the court hall as the messenger entered.

"Your Majesty," he announced breathlessly, "the Nawab has agreed to all your requests."

"That is good news!" exclaimed the king with palpable relief sweeping through him.

"Our diplomats report they were treated exceptionally well," continued the messenger. "The Nawab accepted your gifts graciously and understood your revenue situation. The advance payment was accepted; he requested you to send the remaining funds once you can put them together. Our diplomats enjoyed warm hospitality during their stay at Arcot. They will leave shortly."

The king shut his eyes momentarily to offer gratitude towards the goddess before asking, "But what of Umdat-al-Umara, the prince?"

"Your Majesty," replied the messenger, "he was absent from Arcot along with the British officers. Our diplomats couldn't meet him nor deliver gifts or persuade him directly. But the Nawab assured us he would dissuade his son from any planned attacks."

A brief silence surrounded them. "So far, so good," the king said, his tone lacking its usual enthusiasm. After a moment, his mood shifted once more as he continued, "Overall, this is encouraging news. If the Nawab has pledged his word, I have faith in him."

Appa, still skeptical, offered a fleeting smile. The king removed his pearl beads, gifting them to the messenger before dismissing him.

"Somehow, the prince is eluding us, my lord, and I feel a sense of unease," Appa said.

"Appa, do you believe the prince would launch an attack without his father's knowledge?" the king inquired.

"To my understanding, no."

“And, the Nawab has given his word," added the raja.

"True, but my discomfort lingers. What if the prince strikes and the Nawab denies any involvement afterwards? The damage would already be done. We can’t turn a blind eye like the cat—it shut its eyes and pretended the world wasn’t there," Appa replied.

“Well, we wouldn’t be caught off guard. Our army is prepared for battle; we’re already in war mode," the king asserted. "So let’s take things one step at a time." Appa reluctantly agreed.

"For now, I believe celebrations are warranted. There should be some joy within the palace walls. Let us rejoice in our good fortune, Appa," said the king. Appa nodded cautiously.

A grand Ramanavami followed suit. In the main hall, a large display featured intricately carved wooden and painted clay dolls of Lord Rama, Sita, Hanuman, alongside other deities and scenes from epic tales adorning the walls. The palace was festooned with vibrant flowers that filled every corner with color and fragrance. Elaborate ceremonies unfolded as noble ladies filled the halls with their laughter and chatter. Brass tumblers brimming with buttermilk and *panagam*—a sweet drink concoction of jaggery and cardamom—were served to all guests present. Laughter from children echoed throughout as two-year-old Vellachi revelled among her friends, surrounded by little girls who showered her with affection through playful kisses and gentle pats on her cheek. She danced joyfully with them non-stop, filling her mother, the rani, with overwhelming happiness that brought tears to her eyes.

The festivities stretched late into the night amid rounds of feasting and snacking that delighted everyone present. As dawn approached, nobles began to depart in palanquins and coaches, fatigue overtaking them as they struggled against sleepiness while lamp lights flickered out one by one. The palace staff returned to their quarters wearing satisfied smiles as piece by piece, the shindig wound down to serene silence.

◆

A loud pounding at the door of the king's bedroom jolted him awake. Repeated knocks stirred his personal attendant from slumber as well. Sitting up in bed, he saw Chinna Maruthu burst through the half-open door before kneeling beside his cot, urgently alerting him to danger. The raja regarded him curiously at this unexpected hour of disturbance.

"My lord," Chinna boomed urgently, "the Arcot prince has camped at our northern borders along with British forces."

"What? Is this true?" The king could hardly process what he heard; disbelief etched across his features turned quickly to fury as he exclaimed: "Betrayal! That rogue Nawab!" He stood abruptly pacing back and forth while disgust twisted his expression further into lines of anger before motioning for Chinna to stand up straight with arms crossed defiantly.

"How many men are there?" he demanded.

"A small brigade composed of British soldiers along with Arcot infantry and cavalry; scouts estimate around three thousand men total," Chinna reported gravely while adding that Manickam, the chief scout, had also spotted horse-drawn artillery—guns and cannons included.

"But we have over four thousand troops gathered there already?"

"Yes indeed."

"Let's dispatch another two thousand then; I'll manage just fine with two thousand men stationed at Kalaiyarkoil fort." The raja questioned further: "Who commands this British force?"

"Major General Joseph Smith alongside Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Bonjour."

"Then it's settled; I must head to our borders immediately—to confront them directly—and protect my kingdom!" roared the king decisively.

"But, my lord, we cannot yet confirm the presence of British commanders at the borders," the scout accompanying Chinna

reported. "Manickam instructed me to alert you first. He mentioned he would provide confirmation in a day or two."

"In that case, my lord, let us adhere to the original plan, if you permit," Chinna suggested.

"But, I must inspire my soldiers. I need to be there," the raja insisted.

"My lord, what if the English commanders are not at the borders and instead decide to attack the fort?" Chinna inquired.

Turning to his personal attendant, the raja commanded, "Quickly send a messenger to Appa's residence; I want him here immediately."

"I was uncertain whether the prince would heed his father's counsel. Furthermore, the Nawab might dismiss the attack entirely and feign ignorance about its occurrence," Appa remarked, irritation creeping into his tone.

"What are our next steps?" the king demanded, his voice laced with anger.

"Let us summon the messenger and instruct him to return to Arcot, urging our diplomats to persuade the Nawab to recall his son's forces," Appa suggested. The king clapped his hands twice, prompting the door to swing open. "Fetch the messenger from his residence and bring him before me," he commanded. The attendant bowed respectfully.

"Now!" bellowed the king. The attendant dashed out, and within a *kanam*—a span of four minutes—the messenger had mounted his horse and sped off towards Arcot.

"What shall we do now, Appa?" inquired the king.

"Your Majesty, let us deploy additional troops to the border while we await Manickam's confirmation before devising any plans," Appa replied earnestly. "Let us leave for the Kalaiyarkoil fort. But, we should ensure that the rani and princess are safely escorted to Kollangudi palace; it is merely a journey of less than five *nazhigais* from Kalaiyarkoil Fort," he added.

East of the Sivaganga palace, the Kollungudi palace and Kalaiyarkoil Fort rested at distances of thirty *kadams* and thirty-five *kadams*, respectively, with a *kadam* being nearly equivalent to a kilometer. At a gallop, one could reach Kollungudi palace and Kalaiyarkoil Fort in about two *nazhigais* from the palace, which is roughly three-quarters of an hour by Western timekeeping; one *nazhigai* being around twenty-four minutes on the Western clock.

"Vadhyar, her *silambam guru*, will accompany them," said the raja with a nod of approval.

"My lord, if I may," Appa said, his voice steady.

"Go on, Appa; you have my ears," the raja replied, leaning slightly forward.

"Let us refrain from sending anyone with the rani, as her location must remain a secret. She will be safeguarded by the five hundred soldiers already stationed at Kollangudi palace. Accompanying her will be her retinue of women, including Kuyili and other skilled attendants. Moreover, she must protect your heir as well, my lord. Therefore, I propose that we keep her destination known only to a select few—just the Maruthu brothers and myself. They are well-versed in discretion and secrecy. This way, we can ensure the kingdom's safety," Appa concluded earnestly.

"That makes sense," the raja acknowledged thoughtfully.

◆

The following day, little princess Vellachi and the rani stood ready in the *durbar* hall, anticipation etched on their faces. The rani was resplendent in a red Kanchipuram silk saree adorned with intricate patterns, a large *kumkum* dot glimmering on her forehead—an auspicious image of dignity and bravery. As the raja entered, she spoke with resolve: "My lord, please allow me to take my place beside you in battle."

"My dear," he replied firmly but gently, "I cannot risk your safety."

"Do you doubt my courage?" She challenged him lightly.

"You possess more capability than my entire army combined," he admitted sincerely. "But as your husband and father to our child—and as ruler of this beloved land—I am duty-bound to prioritize your safety above all else. Please understand; it is for the sake of this beautiful kingdom that I must send you away for protection."

Tears welled in the rani's eyes as she knelt before him in supplication for his blessing. Little Vellachi mirrored her actions and fell at his feet too. The king lifted his daughter into his arms tenderly, planting a soft kiss on her forehead as he whispered close to her ear: "Be a good girl and listen to your mother."

A long procession of palanquins began its journey from the palace gates. From one ornate palanquin adorned with jewels, a delicate hand waved goodbye to the king as he returned the gesture, tears glistening in his eyes.

◆

Five *nazhigais* after departing from the Sivaganga palace on their eastward journey, a cluster of rock-cut structures emerged against the horizon, silhouetted by the blazing sun. These imposing yet low structures served as both barracks and a temporary palace, built by the raja's father and named Aranmanai Siruvayal. Functionally, it resembled a fort; during times of anticipated conflict, it was stocked with supplies, garrisoned troops, and armies to bolster its defenses.

The scorching heat of *agninakshatram*—literally meaning "the star on fire," referring to the sweltering month of May—had not yet dissipated. Even though Appa and the king set out at dawn with his retinue and army, including the Maruthu brothers, the sun showed no mercy; waves of heat and swirling dust began their assault as early as daybreak.

"I don't understand why Manickam returned to the northern borders to verify Smith and Bonjour's presence, Your Majesty," Chinna remarked, falling back slightly to converse with the king.

"There's no need for concern, my son. During the Madurai battle, he had safely escorted the rani to her father's house. He provided us with precise intelligence about troop movements along the western borders that led us to victory. Plus, the rani's *guru*, Vadhyar, is accompanying him now. We have another pair of vigilant eyes out there," replied the king with an encouraging smile.

"That was quite some time ago, my lord. We may need to proceed cautiously," Chinna countered.

The king thought that perhaps it was the relentless heat driving Chinna's anxiety. Despite being a seasoned warrior with a fiery spirit, the king often sensed his men were vying for dominance over one another—a sibling-like rivalry. With a reassuring smile, he patted Chinna on the back and urged him not to fret any longer.

Soon after they arrived at the fort and had breakfast, Appa sought an audience with the king. Upon entering, the king greeted him warmly: "Why do you need to request an audience, Appa? You can always walk right into my chamber."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I believe there's still time to convey our message to the prince, despite his father's oversight," Appa said.

"How do you propose we do that?" The king asked.

"Why not write a letter to the English? The prince is so hard to reach; perhaps he would pay attention to their words."

The king pondered this suggestion.

"Let us inform Smith, the leader of the English troops, that we have paid the advance. The Nawab has accepted all the terms and has assured that there will be no war," Appa continued. "I'll also provide a detailed account of our revenues to persuade the English to heed reason."

The raja sensed an unspoken weight in Appa's weary tone. If Appa harbored any inkling of unease akin to his own, then he too must feel that something was amiss. Was an unseen force working against them? The raja wrestled with confusion and discomfort in

silence; both he and Appa would never voice their doubts aloud. Would fortune eventually favor them?

Four days later, the king awoke to find a messenger from the neighboring Ramanathapuram kingdom. With a respectful bow, the messenger presented a parchment for the raja to read, which Appa swiftly took and unfolded.

"We mean no harm to you. Could you please come over to Ramanathapuram as we need to talk?" signed Smith. A heavy silence enveloped the room.

"Is Smith in the south?" asked the king.

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the messenger.

"When did he arrive?"

"About a month ago, Your Majesty," said the messenger.

"Go now and have your lunch in the kitchen," said the king dismissively. "We need to ascertain Smith's exact whereabouts in Ramanathapuram. Ask the Maruthu brothers to consult with this messenger," instructed the raja as he turned towards his attendant.

Shortly after, Chinna entered. "A small battalion of the English, led by Smith, is approaching from the southeast, my lord," he reported after speaking with the messenger.

"I have already drafted a detailed letter outlining our rebuttal to the tax demands and emphasizing that we have paid a substantial advance of five thousand pagodas. It opens by highlighting the fact that the Nawab has agreed to refrain from any attacks. Please allow me to deliver this letter to Smith in person and convince him of its importance," Appa urged. Always averse to conflict, Appa had a knack for devising last-minute strategies to prevent wars.

The king consented, but issued a directive. "Appa, my trusted guards will accompany you."

"Do not worry, my lord. I shall return with good news," Appa assured him.

"Upon your return, I would like you to go to Kollungudi to join the rani," said the king.

Appa nodded respectfully before exiting.

The following day, Manickam was brought into the king's presence with both Maruthu brothers standing close by.

"What news?" asked the raja.

"My lord, the prince and Bonjour are still at the northern borders; we have located them," Manickam replied.

"And where is Smith?" Chinna growled.

"In the south, Your Majesty," Manickam answered.

"But you indicated he was in the north with the prince?" Chinna pressed.

"Then he must have left for Ramanathapuram, my lord," Manickam clarified. "As I mentioned before, they were all there about two months ago."

"You said you'd confirm their location in a few days," Chinna interjected sharply.

"My lord, due to various obstacles we've placed along our paths, it took me an entire month to reach here. I apologize for this delay. However, when I left the northern borders, Smith had indeed begun his journey towards Ramanathapuram. So, that was all I could report at that time." Manickam's tone carried an air of regret.

With a satisfied smile, the king waved away the spy's concerns. Turning to Chinna he remarked, "Now we wait for Appa."

"Vadhyar has also returned; he was inquiring about the rani, my lord," Chinna added.

"Just tell him she is well and happy," replied the king.

◆

A week later, Periya shouted from the watchtower, "There!" He pointed towards a group approaching the fort. The palanquin appeared as little more than an arch among the horsemen, its stature

slightly lower than theirs, with four barefoot servants holding it aloft. Guards surrounded the entourage, ushering them swiftly into the sky lit courtyard. Raja Muthu gripped the arms of his seat tightly, concentrating fully on the unfolding scene. The Maruthu brothers dashed forward, their faces alight with anticipation for good news.

“Appa! What news?” Raja called out, holding his breath in suspense.

"Smith has agreed to our explanation and reasoning, and he mentioned that he will direct Bonjour and the prince to pull back the troops," Appa said with a smile.

The warring Maruthu brothers felt a wave of disappointment sweep through them, but no one noticed Manickam’s quiet dismay—his reasons were, of course, different from theirs.

Unseen by the soldiers who had begun drinking and celebrating mid-morning with boisterous laughter over what they believed was good news, Manickam slipped away on a horse heading westward to cross the Sivaganga palace and reach the forest at its edge. He entered the Arcot prince’s tent where Bonjour stood by a table displaying what appeared to be a map of the kingdom stretched across its surface.

"Has Smith’s orders reached you?" Manickam asked nervously.

"Unfortunately, yes," Bonjour smiled slyly. The prince let out a roaring laughter.

Their strategy was to launch an attack from the west, where they had set up camp, while Smith and his small contingent would advance from the southeast, effectively trapping the Kalaiyarkoil fort between them. Manickam was tasked with spreading misleading information to ensure the success of their surprise assault.

"We attack!" The prince slammed his fist on the table with conviction. Manickam felt a surge of hope about claiming the land promised by this audacious prince.

“Don’t worry, Manickam; Smith’s acceptance was merely a facade to convince the king of our sincerity,” Bonjour reassured him.

“It was just a lie to make Appa believe us,” Umdat said, laughter dancing in his eyes. “We’re attacking. And you, Manickam, must make sure the king arrives as we’ve planned.”

◆

That afternoon, Bonjour summoned a meeting at his tent. The chiefs of the infantry and cavalry leaned forward, their expressions serious as they absorbed the details of Bonjour’s strategy.

"Tonight, we strike the Sivaganga palace and set fire to the houses and fields surrounding it. One battalion will halt at the palace. By dawn tomorrow, the remaining battalions will head towards Kalaiyarkoil town and establish camp in the nearby forest. Our positions by the Kalaiyarkoil temple must be ready before first light the day after. Let’s move!" Bonjour commanded with authority.

"Why waste time taking the palace?" questioned the prince, his brow furrowing with skepticism. "It seems like a distraction. What if the king is alerted and manages to flee?"

"The purpose of this plan is to prevent any escape routes for the king," Bonjour explained patiently. "By burning down the fields, we cut off his access to food and resources." He turned his gaze towards the chiefs, urging them, "Return to your tents now and rest well; we leave at sunset."

"It’s your responsibility now, Manickam," said the prince with a smirk. "Make sure that by dawn two days from now, we have him at the temple. That should be straightforward since Smith has already sounded a retreat." With that, Manickam spurred his horse away.

The chiefs made their way back to their tents to prepare for what lay ahead as dusk approached. Bonjour scanned his battalions; many were busy cleaning rifle barrels or leaning against wooden

crates filled with ammunition. On one side, soldiers loyal to the prince knelt in fervent prayer to Allah. Bonjour noted how these troops were largely untrained—likely to scatter at even a hint of trouble. The prince may project an air of confidence, but with his youthful features betraying naiveté, it was clear he would struggle to lead effectively without Bonjour's guidance.

◆

Meanwhile, inside Kalaiyarkoil fort, revelry reigned supreme as everyone indulged in drink and feasting. Fruit wine flowed freely among soldiers who quickly succumbed to intoxication; even Appa was spotted holding a small pot of wine in hand. Before taking a sip himself, he urged the king to visit the temple for prayers on the morrow.

Manickam interjected smoothly, advising against such an outing due to likely drunkenness and hangover that could lead to desecration of their sacred space—a suggestion so reasonable that even Appa found no rebuttal. Chinna caught sight of Manickam from across the room but fell into a drunken stupor before he could voice any thoughts of dissent. Not knowing what awaited the trusting king, he clapped Manickam on the shoulder in agreement with this prudent counsel.

◆

The following day, everyone awoke late and began the task of packing to return to the palace. By evening, bullock carts were lined up, horses were saddled, and weapons were stowed away, all set to be transported the next morning after the king's prayers at the Kalaiyarkoil temple. It did not cross the minds of the king, the Maruthu brothers, or even Appa to dispatch scouts ahead to evaluate the travel routes leading westward to the palace. They assumed that Smith's battalion was moving southwards—which was indeed accurate—and that Bonjour and the prince were dismantling their positions and retreating from the northern borders, a journey that would take half a day by horseback from the Sivaganga palace.

As the sun dipped low in the western sky, soldiers indulged in arrack and a hearty dinner before collapsing onto their straw mats for rest. Meanwhile, an army equipped with English cannons and rifles stealthily advanced through the twilight towards the temple after laying waste to Kalaiyarkoil town. There was just enough light to see the swell of the regiment and the pointed turbans of the prince's troops as they marched silently after killing everyone in town, careful not to set fire.

Kaleeswarar Kovil was the temple's original name, though the mispronounced Kalaiyarkoil had lingered for generations. Raja Muthu and his ancestors were regular attendees during festivals or whenever they sought solace in prayer before Lord Shiva, the deity of the temple. The king felt a magnetic pull towards the ornate temple tower; a routine dip in the sacred tank believed to cleanse him of his transgressions. His second wife, Gauri Nachiyar, who had traveled with him to the fort, would join him in expressing gratitude to Goddess Swarnambikai, Lord Shiva's consort, within the temple's perimeter.

As dawn broke, so too did five hundred artillery pieces and a thousand irregular infantrymen stealthily position themselves among the shrubs and undergrowth surrounding the temple. Behind a sturdy tree trunk, Bonjour diligently carved into its bark: June 25, 1772.

As the royal entourage arrived at the temple entrance, it struck the king as breathtakingly beautiful yet unsettlingly silent to the Maruthu brothers. A towering compound wall loomed over them, fourteen times a man's height, encasing the entire complex with an impenetrable thickness that seemed to guard its secrets fiercely. A wave of regret washed over the king for not having Rani Velu by his side; however, he reasoned that it was unwise for everyone to congregate in one place. Dismounting from his horse and clasping Gauri's arm gently, he stepped into the temple alongside the brothers and Manickam.

"Please remove your swords and daggers," Manickam instructed firmly. "The sanctum sanctorum cannot be desecrated with weapons." The king complied graciously, relinquishing his sword and dagger along with a few bodyguards who followed suit. Manickam cast an impatient glance at the brothers. "We will not remove them. Sorry," they replied defiantly. The stubborn resolve in their eyes silenced any further orders from him.

As they approached the shrine for prayers, unease flickered in the priest's gaze; still, he began chanting despite Manickam's watchful presence bearing down on him like a heavy cloud. Periya observed this tension keenly while studying Manickam closely. Just then, as King Muthu and Gauri knelt before the shrine in reverence, Periya caught sight of Manickam stealthily slipping towards the entrance—swords and daggers tucked away beneath his cloak. Panic surged through Periya as he dashed after him; however, it was too late—the sound of gunfire erupted outside. With a swift motion, he drove his dagger deep into Manickam's lower abdomen. Manickam collapsed, succumbing to the fatal wound.

Periya sprinted back, shouting at a soldier, "Quick, scale the back wall and dash through the forest; you'll find Vadhyar with a few horses tied to a tree. Take one and gallop towards the fort to alert the army." He thrust a long rope ending in an iron pulley into the soldier's hands. Meanwhile, the priest gestured for the king's guards to approach a heavy wooden door that concealed swords, spears, daggers, shields, and bows with arrows. Gauri stood paralyzed, her gaze fixed ahead as chaos swirled around her. English soldiers stormed into the temple, their rifles cracking like thunder as they emptied rounds with frantic urgency.

The priest collapsed under fire, followed closely by the queen. Raja Muthu charged towards them wielding swords in both hands just before the soldiers could reload. Chinna swung his *valari* with deadly precision, taking down several foes; arrows cascaded upon another batch entering the temple like rain from an angry sky. Periya grappled with several redcoats, slamming their heads against

the unforgiving stone floor. Spears flew alongside arrows as men howled in agony.

The raja pushed forward towards the entrance but was blocked by the brothers. "Please stay safe until our army arrives, my lord," they urged repeatedly while glancing anxiously at Gauri's lifeless body that fueled Raja Muthu's fury.

◆

"It has already been five *nazhigais*; where is our army?" Periya asked Chinna urgently. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of their guard on the wall signaling that help was on its way—though most had slipped away during last night's darkness and only a few hundred left were approaching. The guard quickly descended to join the fray but was struck down by gunfire.

"My lord, we must escape," implored his brothers as they darted away from the entrance towards the far wall.

"I will never do that!" roared Raja Muthu as he charged in defiance of their pleas. The brothers tossed ropes towards the wall but soon abandoned them to follow their king instead. "Let us close this entrance door; it will take time for enemy soldiers to scale the walls," suggested Periya and Chinna together. The king nodded in agreement.

The heavy wooden door loomed a dozen feet from the shrine, at the bottom of several steps. As the raja took a step forward, an arrow grazed his shield's rim; another whistled past where his face had been just moments before—he instinctively ducked low. Raja Muthu spotted a white leg before him and thrust his sword into it; it buckled beneath him with a thud as its owner fell lifelessly to ground. Standing beside him, Periya drove his spear into an enemy helmet with such force that brain matter splattered onto stone tiles below them. All three ducked bullets while racing for safety to the door when suddenly an enemy soldier in a top hat lunged at Chinna with a dagger—but anticipating this move, King Muthu sliced off his hand before he could strike.

Finally united in effort, three pairs of hands pushed against that heavy door: Chinna and Raja Muthu on one side while Periya strained against it from another side. Just as they nearly succeeded in closing it shut, a cannonball erupted through the door; wood splinters flew everywhere flinging all three men away from each other like rag dolls caught in an explosion.

Within moments, a few hundred red coat soldiers gathered by the entrance wall and opened fire. Nickel bullets rained down, striking the king with brutal accuracy, some grazing the brothers' necks, heads, and legs. The brothers knelt before the king as he leaned in to whisper urgent instructions into their ears: protect Rani Velu and Princess Vellachi. "Take them to Virupatchi," were his final words. The enemy soldiers hurriedly reloaded their guns. Periya and Chinna gently closed the raja's eyes, bowed their heads in respect, and vanished from sight.

◆

With unwavering determination, the brothers pushed forward, ignoring the enemy bullets that zipped past their shields like angry hornets. They scrambled up the wall as swiftly as possible before descending with the pulleys. Just before removing the hooks at the top, they caught sight of Bonjour in his red vest and white-piped trousers alongside a flamboyant prince entering the temple amid a display of pomp and celebration. Accompanying them were shouts of triumph: "The king is dead! The king is dead!" Only as they made their way towards the Kalaiyarkoil fort did they ponder what had happened to the army left behind at the fort. There was no need for imagination; devastation lay starkly before them.

Smoke billowed from the fort while bodies sprawled across the ground—an eerie contrast to the previous night's revelry. Among those lifeless forms, Appa's was notably absent. The brothers felt a flicker of relief at the thought that he might have escaped just in time to escort the rani back to Sivaganga palace—perhaps he had fled moments before enemies reduced everything to ruin.

During those days, rajas consistently followed ancient warfare ethical codes; tactics such as surprise assaults and ambushes were totally absent, especially following the mutual acceptance of a truce or peace agreement. Also, war was traditionally waged between two armies without involving settlements or civilians. But others followed an entirely different set of rules—looting, setting fire to crops, and slaughtering without mercy became so commonplace that any ethical act was met with shock. In these turbulent times, moral principles were cast aside as if they were a tattered garment thrown away in a moment of panic.

◆

"Danger, danger!" Vetrivel Vadhyar shouted, his voice echoing through the grand halls of the Kollungudi palace. Kuyili hurried down the corridor, her heart racing as she sought to understand the cause of his frantic cries. They burst into the rani's chamber together. "Please brace yourself, Your Majesty," Kuyili urged, her brow furrowed with concern.

"What happened? Everything was fine just yesterday! The messenger assured us there would be no war and that we would all return to the palace today. I sent back all the soldiers to the Sivaganga palace yesterday," the rani exclaimed, rising from her seat once the maid had gently lifted little Vellachi from her lap.

"My queen, can we have a moment alone?" Vadhyar requested, his tone grave. The maid was dismissed without hesitation.

"The king has been martyred, Your Majesty."

"No!" The rani's scream shattered the air as she sank back onto her chair in disbelief. Tears cascaded down her cheeks while her shoulders trembled with grief as Kuyili stood by helplessly.

"Your Majesty, this is not a time for tears. Sivaganga palace has been looted; all soldiers at the fort and those returning have been slain; the town lies in ashes. The enemy approaches—we must flee!" Vadhyar insisted urgently.

"What will I do without my Muthu?" The rani's voice quivered as she froze in despair. A profound ache gripped her soul like molten lava coursing through a volcano—intensified by the bitter thought that she could have been near him to prevent this treachery or share in his fate and was instead powerless to act. She looked around to unleash her anger on someone; however, pity met her gaze from every woman present. Instead, she rose and began pacing by the window, wailing softly while beating her head against the wall before gradually succumbing to quiet sobs.

"Quickly! We must move," came Vadhyar's urgent voice once more.

"Stop! If they come here, I will die! Don't rush me!" she shouted back fiercely.

After a moment of silence filled with heavy breaths, she turned towards Vadhyar and asked quietly yet firmly, "Where is my husband's body?"

"At Kalaiyarkoil temple, Your Majesty. He fought valiantly like a lion despite being armed only with old swords and blunt axes," Vadhyar replied solemnly.

"We need to cremate him properly. Is there a way to discreetly remove his body?" she pressed desperately.

"It is too dangerous to attempt that now; at best we might disguise ourselves and witness it discreetly. Please think of little Vellachi," he cautioned gently.

Turning towards Vellachi, the queen pulled her close into an embrace, kissing and comforting her as she whispered softly, "Don't worry; mother will protect you and ensure you receive what is rightfully yours."

"Find out when and where they plan to cremate my husband," she ordered Kuyili sharply.

"Your Majesty, may I speak?" Vadhyar ventured cautiously as the rani gestured for him to continue with a nod of consent.

"If you attend the raja's cremation after it has been announced by the enemy—they will be waiting for you there. They could arrest or even kill you," he warned earnestly.

"I fear neither fate," she declared defiantly.

"Your Majesty! You must consider your daughter!" he pleaded again urgently.

"But I need one last glimpse of my husband." Tears streamed down her swollen eyes in silent agony.

Vadhyar fell silent for a moment before speaking again resolutely: "I will arrange everything. My scouts will gather information about when they plan to cremate him. If Your Majesty wears a *burqa* alongside Kuyili—then you can attend unnoticed." The rani nodded slowly in agreement.

"But immediately after that you both must leave at once! I'll write down precise directions leading you safely to our allies at Virupatchi. Follow them closely; any deviation could spell disaster for us all," he emphasized firmly before preparing to depart.

That evening, in front of the Kalaiyarkoil temple, the ground lay bare. The raja's body rested atop a makeshift pyre of timber, while others were carelessly stacked in a haphazard mound of twigs and branches. The air was thick with the acrid scent of smoke rising from smoldering thatched huts and the charred remains of villagers.

The *agraharams*—homes clustered around the four streets encircling the temple—were ablaze, leaving many without tiled roofs and their walls marred by fire and destruction. Kalaiyarkoil stood in ruins. Those villagers who remained formed a somber circle around the pyres to honor their king. Enemy soldiers had surrounded the area like vultures waiting for scraps. In a surprising turn of events, the rani and Kuyili decided against donning *burqas*; with no other women in Kalaiyarkoil cloaked in them, they would stand out even more. Contrary to Vadhyar's advice, they would be easily recognized.

As flames licked at the pyre, the rani's eyes remained fixed on her husband. She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes in prayer. Dressed entirely in white cloth, only his face—with its prominent mustache—remained visible beneath a royal turban; however, both the turban brooch and necklace that typically adorned him were absent. His visage radiated an otherworldly glow reserved for martyrs.

Dried blood splattered against temple walls pockmarked by gunfire, which had not escaped unscathed either—the heavy doors lay splintered open, and several idols lay shattered on the ground. Still, enemy soldiers traipsed through, with little regard for sanctity or reverence, as they looted whatever they could find.

From her peripheral vision, she caught sight of them bursting into laughter over some trivial jest shared among themselves. A surge of bitterness welled up within her: Laugh all you want, you foolish Englishmen; my Muthu may have fallen as one warrior, but where he lies now, countless others will rise to defeat your red coats soon enough. The pyres crackled ominously as flames danced into the twilight sky in flickering shades of red, orange, and yellow. the rani gritted her teeth until Kuyili gently tapped her wrist and murmured, "It's time, Your Majesty; please remain calm." There were no women present at all; Kuyili was determined not to attract attention.

Dressed in a wrinkled green Pathan *kurta* and *pyjama* with her well-groomed hair tucked away beneath a cone-shaped turban, the rani and Kuyili resembled Prince Umdat's soldiers—a difficult target for suspicion to land upon. Thick smoke billowed from the pyres; when it began to sting their eyes painfully, both women slipped quietly away from the crowd into fading daylight before vanishing into the forest towards their waiting horses.

They rode into darkness to the Kollungudi palace along the route Vadhyar had outlined. From there, to ride to Virupatchi, he said, it would take only six *nazhigais* on horseback—two hours and twenty minutes by Western clock—and insisted it was indeed their

best option. He instructed Kuyili on memorizing town names along their path to ensure they stayed true to course while noting that they would traverse Natham and Kottampatti forests far removed from Madurai, another enemy kingdom.

■

# *Virupatchi, 1772*

Waiting outside the gates of the Kollungudi palace, a small group of female soldiers stood vigil in the wilderness, guarding the princess. When the rani and Kuyili reached, one soldier stepped forward and reported, "The Maruthu brothers had arrived a while ago; they were badly injured. We offered them treatment, but they insisted on leaving with only cloth wrapped around their wounds." She paused, glancing at her comrades. "They mentioned heading to Virupatchi to meet Gopal Nayakar and arrange for your stay."

"Why isn't Appa here?" Rani Velu asked, her voice laced with concern.

No one could provide an answer. "He didn't accompany the king to the temple; that's all we know," Kuyili replied.

The rani absorbed this news with a mix of relief and sorrow swirling within her. Was he dead at the fort? Had he managed to escape? "He was meant to leave the fort to take me back to the Sivaganga palace," she murmured softly, clinging to a thread of hope that he had not perished on his way.

A few male soldiers joined Kuyili, little Vellachi, and Rani Velu as they set off into the banyan groves along a winding path towards Virupatchi. The trail split from the dusty road leading to Madurai and rose gently towards their destination.

On Kollungudi outskirts lay Ariyakurichi, a village populated by shepherds; this thought prompted Kuyili to consider arranging food for their journey as they hurried onward. Soon enough, the

path leveled out before them as a herd of goats trotted across their route. Twilight settled over the landscape, yet the extended days of the *Aadi* month lingered, allowing daylight to stretch and cast elongated shadows. Suddenly, from behind the grazing herd, a slender figure emerged—a girl no older than ten—her small hand gripping a whip with surprising confidence. Her eyes widened with admiration as she gazed up at the mounted female warriors.

"Where does this path lead, child?" Kuyili inquired.

"To Natham," she replied brightly.

"Your Majesty," Kuyili said, turning slightly towards Rani Velu, "it's quite far off. Should we gather some food for our journey? You haven't eaten even a morsel today."

"I don't need anything," replied Rani Velu flatly. After a moment's reflection, she added, "Of course you all need sustenance. Go ahead and eat something but let's limit it to one *nazhigai*."

"Oh, little girl," said Kuyili kindly, "what's your name?"

"Udaiyal, my lady," she answered while brushing away strands of hair from her face. Standing tall with a stout wooden stick in hand and her black-beaded necklace catching glimmers of light in the dusk, her eyes sparkled with wonder at these formidable women.

"Could you fetch us some gruel or curd—or any food you can find? A few sarees would be helpful too," requested Kuyili.

"With pleasure! I'll be right back!" Udaiyal exclaimed with enthusiasm before darting off towards her village like a flash of lightning.

"Let's step aside into the trees for cover," suggested one soldier as they moved off the path onto dry ground dotted with thorny bushes.

"What has happened to our armies on the northern borders?" asked Rani Velu anxiously.

"They were routed," came Kuyili's grim response.

"All four thousand?" The rani stared at her incredulously.

"Sadly yes, Your Majesty." Kuyili's voice was heavy with sorrow. "Manickam—the spy turned double agent—misled us with false information. The prince had nearly six thousand soldiers under his command; our infantry was overwhelmed by theirs. With English forces wielding superior firearms against us... we stood no chance."

"What about our soldiers stationed in the forts?"

"The same applied to them. However, I suspect the prince and the English took a different route, avoiding where our troops stood ready for battle. A good fight would have brought them immense satisfaction. Manickam not only delayed our information but also muddled it with his back-and-forth chatter, confusing us further. The enemy had bought his loyalty, Your Majesty," Kuyili replied. "But Periya killed him," she said, after a pause.

In the next instant, Kuyili's eyebrows shot up as her face brightened with a wide smile. "The food has arrived! Good thing, good thing," she exclaimed as Udaiyal lowered a large pot of gruel from her head and untied a sack filled with small earthen vessels and raw onions. The entourage watched as Udaiyal ladled gruel into each little pot before topping them with peeled shallots. "Please, help yourselves," Udaiyal urged.

Kuyili accepted gratefully and gulped down her portion in one go. They stared into the encroaching darkness ahead, each lost in their thoughts while they savored the warm gruel and crunched on the shallots. Udaiyal beamed at them but paused when she stood to offer some to the queen; Kuyili gently intervened, saying, "It's alright. Let me take care of that."

After exchanging a few moments of comforting words, Kuyili ensured the queen ate her gruel and handed back her empty pot to her while Udaiyal watched in astonishment. Later on, Kuyili pulled Udaiyal aside to explain what had transpired that day.

A shadow crossed Udaiyal's face as Kuyili fell quiet. But soon after, she sprang up again, seeking permission from Kuyili. Bowing deeply before the queen, she implored, "Your Majesty, please allow me to accompany you. I wish to be another soldier ready to lay

down my life for you." The queen remained silent; her mind drifted into distant memories as an uncomfortable stillness settled between them. Udaiyal stayed bowed low, awaiting an answer.

Kuyili touched the queen's arm gently—this marked the first time a village girl had pledged such loyalty to royalty. Each word from this young girl's mouth eased Rani's heavy heart like warm butter melting into cold cream. Guilt consumed the rani for not asserting herself when she felt compelled to be by her husband's side at the fort; perhaps then she would have noticed Manickam's squinted eyes or sensed something amiss that could have dissuaded him from heading to temple grounds—her mind raced through countless thoughts that culminated in tears streaming down her cheeks despite feeling awkward about it all.

As Udaiyal lifted her gaze towards the rani's tear-streaked face, she instinctively reached out to wipe away those tears.

"You are such a beautiful child; please live your life happily here in your village without longing for danger," said the queen softly while blessing her and stroking her hair.

"Is there anything else you need from me?" asked Udaiyal with disappointment creeping into her voice.

After a brief moment of silence filled with contemplation, Udaiyal added brightly yet nervously: "I can run back into town for more sarees or rugs or even food and water for your journey."

"Nothing else is needed right now," replied the queen while turning towards Kuyili who simply shook her head silently.

"Now return home and get some rest," commanded Rani gently but firmly as she raised her voice slightly.

Udaiyal bowed deeply once more before stepping backward slowly; she turned around just in time to see their group mounting their horses. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she kept watch over them with hands clasped tightly together while streams flowed down her cheeks quietly unnoticed by others nearby.

To Ariyakurichi's right, the landscape rose sharply as rocks and trees jutted towards Melur. This wasn't a well-trodden path; thick overgrowth and thorny shrubs clawed at the horses' legs, forcing the group to navigate single-file along narrow trails. The path would eventually lead to Kottampatti, roughly two *nazhigais* away, from which a broader route would open up towards Virupatchi—the quickest way there. Vadhyar had made sure Kuyili memorized this route.

With a heavy heart burdening her chest, the queen turned towards the narrow path ahead and left behind yet another piece of herself along with Udaiyal.

◆

Udaiyal maintained a steady gaze at the entourage until they vanished from view. She lifted her eyes to the twilight sky, where specks of stars began to twinkle, sighed softly, and turned her attention back to her goats grazing on the shrubs nearby, their bleats punctuating the quiet evening. The sound of horse hooves broke through her thoughts, prompting her to look back. A group of men on horseback, clad in uniforms that hinted at military affiliation, trailed behind two figures up ahead. Straining to see through the encroaching darkness, she discerned a general draped in a silk robe and a white man adorned in a red coat and trousers—referred to as "pipes" in colloquial Tamil.

"Hey, you there!" shouted the white man. "Did you see a woman and child pass by on horseback?"

She feigned ignorance. The officer dismounted with agility, grasping a fire torch as he scrutinized the path ahead. As he rose, his face lit up with an unsettling grin. "There, there, my little fox," he cooed mockingly.

"My goats," Udaiyal replied tersely.

The officer ventured further down the trail before returning with an even broader smile plastered across his face. "Tell me, where did they go?" inquired the general in his luxurious robe.

Once more, she pretended not to understand him. A sharp blow struck her shoulders unexpectedly. “Come on now; I don’t have all day,” urged the officer impatiently.

She straightened herself defiantly and waved her hand dismissively. Another strike followed swiftly after.

“Take care of her,” instructed the officer as he sauntered over to inspect some nearby shrubs laden with remnants of gnawed pots.

The soldiers dismounted gleefully, rubbing their hands together as they prepared for their turn with her.

“Hurry it up; we need information from her fast! That woman and child could be halfway across the kingdom by now.” The officer stood casually with his back turned towards them.

Bound tightly to a tree—her wrists and ankles restrained by ropes while another tether connected her neck to one soldier’s grip—Udaiyal’s face was marred by clotted blood and bruises that told tales of relentless torment. Wrapped hastily in a tattered saree that barely concealed her battered form, she braced herself for what was coming next.

With vicious intent, the officer lashed out at her with his belt repeatedly. Yet she remained silent; blood trickled down from an open wound on her forehead while saliva pooled at the corners of her lips. When one soldier yanked on the rope binding her neck too forcefully, it caused her head to collide painfully against the rough bark of the tree trunk—a scream escaped but still no words followed.

The blows continued until fatigue seemed to settle over him like a heavy cloak; finally leaving Udaiyal under guard of his men he muttered ominously, “I’ll be back.”

“Do we really need to pursue this woman and child?” questioned the general hesitantly.

“If we don’t act now," replied the officer sternly, "the rani will come after us without hesitation. Make no mistake: that woman has powerful allies within her kingdom—didn’t you notice how

fiercely that girl kept quiet? She would go to any lengths for the rani's protection."

They entered into the village seeking food and answers but found none among its inhabitants who could offer any useful information regarding their quarry or even hint at possible whereabouts—the only one who might know anything was Udaiyal herself.

As they prepared to leave town empty-handed, an elderly man suddenly approached them saying urgently: "We know nothing about any woman or child but I did see Udaiyal come around begging for gruel earlier today—I watched as she balanced a large pot atop her delicate head heading towards that path."

Returning with renewed fury fueled by this revelation—the officer unleashed another brutal strike against Udaiyal's already injured body; dried blood smeared across what remained of her saree causing even hardened souls like that general's heart ache enough for him avert his gaze knowing full well today might very well be her last breath upon this earth.

Udaiyal opened her mouth, and the officer leaned in, straining to catch her words. Instead, she spat directly onto his face. "Get lost, you imbeciles," she slurred, but before she could finish her sentence, a backhanded blow sent her crashing to the ground. The soldiers yanked her back to her feet. "She is too loyal for words. I'll give her that," the officer said with a hint of annoyance.

"Allow me to speak with her," the general interjected.

"Suit yourself," he replied, stepping aside while still gripping her reins tightly.

The general approached Udaiyal and lifted her chin with a firm hand. It was both heartbreaking and horrifying to behold the extent of her injuries—her cheeks were swollen and bruised, and one eye barely opened from the brutal beatings she had endured. "You can spare yourself death if you cooperate. Tell us where she has gone and which route she took." She remained silent.

"Don't think these tactics will buy you time," he warned sharply. "If not us, someone else will find her soon enough. Soldiers are scouring every corner of this kingdom for that woman and her child. If you point us in the right direction, you might just save your life." He pressed on.

"For a woman, dignity is everything," she replied haltingly, each word strained through swollen lips and a missing tooth as tears trickled down past her broken nose. "You've stripped it all away from me. What do I have left to lose?" "Kill me," she murmured defiantly.

The general felt as though he had been slapped across the face by those words. "Just kill me," she repeated, voice unwavering.

He stared at her battered visage, then reached for his sword at his side and unsheathed it with grim determination. The officer shouted in protest and tugged on the rope binding Udaiyal; however, it was too late—the general swung his sword swiftly across her neck. Her head fell lifelessly to the ground while her body collapsed forward under the force of the officer's pull. Dark blood gushed from the severed neck and pooled around her legs.

"What have you done?" demanded the officer in shock.

"The right thing," replied the general coldly. "We don't need to waste time torturing her for directions; there are plenty of soldiers searching for that woman and child throughout the kingdom already—and we know their likely escape routes."

"Take this narrow path," he commanded decisively. "It's just over a *nazhigai*; they couldn't have gotten far yet. Our Arab steeds will surely catch up with them quickly enough. Let's move out."

◆

The royal entourage galloped forward, led by a male soldier wielding a flickering fire torch. Trailing behind him were the queen, her two-year-old daughter Vellachi, and Kuyili. Four female soldiers formed a protective circle around them, while another male soldier brought up the rear.

The night air was warm, carrying the remnants of the day's oppressive heat in its rare breeze. Jagged hills flanked both sides of their path, with sharp rocks still radiating warmth from the sun that had long since set. They were merely one *nazhigai* away from Kottampatti, their next destination to the west. Suddenly, as the last soldier turned his head, he spotted fire torches racing towards them. "Quick, douse the fire!" he shouted in alarm. "Enemies are approaching."

In an instant, arrows whizzed past the group; some thudded harmlessly into the ground while others flew wide of their mark. The cover of night worked to their advantage as taunts and shouts erupted from the advancing enemy ranks. At a distance of one hundred paces, another volley of arrows rained down like deadly raindrops against stone. Kuyili glanced back and counted quickly: We have equal numbers with them. Nothing to fear; let's take them on, she declared confidently, shifting her shield onto her left shoulder while balancing her *silambu* stick on the other side and securing a dagger and *valari* at her waist. The remaining seven soldiers mirrored her resolve and turned to face their attackers.

A spear zipped past one of Rani's female soldiers; she ducked just in time but stumbled to the ground beside Rani's horse, momentarily oblivious to the encroaching enemy horde. With renewed ferocity, the enemy charged forward and surrounded the women warriors. Kuyili hurled her *valari* with precision, embedding it into an enemy soldier's neck. He instinctively clutched his wound as she lunged forward with her dagger aimed at his chest. The rani and her soldiers flanked Kuyili closely, stabbing and slashing wherever they could offer support until she found herself face-to-face with their general.

"Now!" bellowed the rani.

The general shot a brief glance at her before an unexpected *valari* sliced through the air and grazed his ears. Momentarily stunned, he retaliated fiercely against one of the rani's male soldiers who rushed to defend his comrades. In a swift motion, the rani

shoved him aside to confront other foes threatening them. “You’re a dead woman, Rani!” howled the general amidst the chaos of battle under the cloak of night.

Taunting a woman was never wise, especially a royal one. For the general, blissfully unaware that he was provoking a warrior who had just lost her husband to treachery, his words were nothing less than a self-imposed death sentence. The patriarch general didn't grasp the peril of invoking the wrath of a woman scorned. An enemy spear lunged towards the rani, but she deftly sidestepped it and retaliated with a swift slice of her sword, severing the spearman’s neck. Then, there he stood—the general—before her. She scrutinized him intently, ready for his next move. In an instant, he raised his shield and thrust towards her midsection. She parried with her own shield, but in doing so, she left her arm exposed; he drove forward and knocked her backwards.

Another thrust from the general narrowly missed as she managed to deflect it with her shield. On either side of her, the rani's warriors clashed fiercely with enemy soldiers. A female warrior dispatched an opponent with a sickle aimed at his throat while another warrior expertly redirected an enemy spear in an instant, smashing her *silambu* stick against the man’s face and sending him crashing off his horse. With another fierce blow, she shattered his shield and struck him on the head before moving on to dispatch two more foes.

The general collided forcefully with the rani’s shield, toppling her horse and throwing her to the ground. Acting quickly, she slashed at his horse's legs; it buckled beneath him as he tumbled down alongside it. Unsteady but determined, he drew his sword and swung wildly at the rani. She emerged from behind her shield just in time to jab at his side before he could defend himself fully. The blade pierced through his metal belt and sliced across his belly; he staggered forward and collapsed at an officer's feet who watched in horror as blood pooled around him.

Realizing he was no match for Sivaganga's fierce women warriors, the officer turned to flee but was swiftly caught by Kuyili who pushed him down at the rani's feet. Spotting a piece of Udaiyal's saree tucked in his pocket ignited fury within them both as they interrogated him about recent events that had unfolded after their departure. Disgust washed over them as they learned what had transpired.

"Let me go back!" The rani cried out in anguish while Kuyili held her arms firmly back. "Please, Your Majesty! This is not our moment; there may be more soldiers pursuing us," Kuyili insisted.

They bound the Englishman to a tree and subjected him to brutal torture with every weapon available until finally severing his head from its body—his lifeless form crumpling onto rocky ground.

"How could they have violated such a beautiful little girl? How could anyone find it in their hearts to torture someone so innocent?" The rani wept bitterly. "Today marks my worst day; I will never forget this." Her voice trembled as she continued, "What have I done to deserve this? Why do those who help me end up dying?" Tears streamed down her cheeks while oppressive silence enveloped them like a heavy shroud.

The brief journey felt unbearably long now; none could shake off their grief for the girl who had offered them food and had offered to join them only moments before—and in such horrific circumstances too. Silently, they trudged along the path weighed down by sorrow so profound that even their horses moved slowly instead of galloping ahead.

Something flickered in the distant north; a fire torch danced in the darkness. It could be a hut at the edge of town or perhaps a solitary horseman. What if it were another enemy faction scouring the path, hidden behind just one flickering flame? "Let's disperse to both sides and lie in wait," commanded the rani. The sky over Kottampatti was an unblemished black, devoid of stars, as if the heavens had paused to grieve for the fallen king and the brave Sivaganga warriors. As they lay silently, waiting for their adversaries,

the oppressive heat clung to them, thick enough that they could almost smell each other's sweat. The women's long hair was pulled into tight side buns, now damp and itching from perspiration. Yet, none of the warriors dared to move. A slight gust stirred up dust from the parched ground, swirling around them without offering any relief from the stifling warmth.

As the fire torch drew closer, a dog began barking in alarm. The warriors crouched low again to gauge how many foes approached. Just then, Kuyili let out a soft cooing sound, prompting women on either side to spring forward and encircle the lone figure approaching through the gloom. The male soldiers instinctively turned towards this new potential threat but quickly relaxed when they recognized Appa trudging along with a box and some accouterments strapped onto an improvised sledge hitched to his horse. In that moment of recognition amidst darkness, Appa unsheathed his sword and shouted—a sound that reverberated off jagged stones and sent lizards skittering into shadows.

"Appa!" cheered the rani. Joyful cries erupted among her entourage as everyone dismounted from their horses. Little Vellachi clapped her tiny hands excitedly and leaped onto Appa's horse while calling out "Appa!" He dismounted gracefully and bowed deeply before the rani. "Appa, my dear father," she said tenderly as she too stepped down from her mount. Kuyili steadied little Vellachi on horseback so she wouldn't tumble off.

Noticing Appa's injuries—his limp and torn armor stained with blood—the rani asked urgently, "What happened?"

"Danger, Your Majesty—danger," he replied breathlessly.

"Yes, these are perilous times indeed," said the rani softly yet firmly; "but please tell me what transpired."

"At dawn," Appa began shakily before breaking into sobs. He turned away towards his horse and pressed his forehead against its mane as grief overtook him once more. the rani stood motionless beside him; no words of comfort escaped her lips as she remained

frozen in place. Gently stepping forward, Kuyili urged him softly to gather himself and continue speaking.

"I… I saw him off," Appa stammered with eyes cast downward; his voice faltered under emotion as he struggled to continue.

Kuyili signaled to their men who carefully supported Appa's arms while guiding him to sit on a nearby stone; they wrapped a clean cotton cloth around his bleeding thigh and offered him gruel and water. Meanwhile, Kuyili lifted little Vellachi into her arms for reassurance amid rising tension.

The heavy darkness hung like a weight over them all while hearts sank together in despair. It had taken over forty years to build up this kingdom only for it all to come crashing down within mere hours—a bitter irony when today should have marked celebration since Smith had promised total retreat but instead led only to ruin before their very eyes.

What should have been an occasion filled with pomp now felt like ashes scattered across this wilderness where only a handful of soldiers remained alongside their wounded chief minister—all while her husband lay dead without even proper rites observed for his passing. Instead of returning triumphantly back home to Sivaganga palace adorned with glory befitting royalty—here she sat alone amid chaos running desperately for survival.

With resignation weighing heavily upon her heart, the rani sat down abruptly on cold earth beneath her feet as if surrendering completely to fate itself; sensing this shift in mood surrounding them, Kuyili quickly moved closer engaging playfully with Vellachi, who reached out eagerly shaking her mother's shoulders crying out, "Amma! Amma!" Hearing those familiar words prompted a deep sigh from within the rani who then wandered towards Appa kneeling beside him readying herself once more amidst uncertainty ahead.

Taking a deep breath, Appa rose to his feet, pressing his bandaged thigh. "No, my lady, please don't lose your spirit. Stand tall and never kneel, certainly not before me," he urged.

"You are a father figure to me, Appa. Who else can I turn to for comfort if not you?" The rani replied.

"My dear queen, gather yourself. Now is not the time for sorrow. I know it's easy to say, but please do not let grief take hold. Once it begins, it stretches on endlessly."

"I don't care, Appa; I'll end my own life," she declared.

"Never speak such sinful words, Your Majesty," Appa exclaimed in shock. "What about our little princess? What about Raja Muthu's last wish to protect you?"

"Kuyili will look after the princess. I'll offer myself to the sacred fire in *Udankattai*—the Sati practice of South India."

Appa shook his head vigorously in denial. He hesitated as he searched for words to console the rani. Finally, he said firmly, "Let us first escape to Virupatchi; then we can decide what to do next." The rani lowered her gaze in acceptance and nodded slowly.

"I left the fort early this morning after seeing off the raja. On my way to Kollungudi palace, a scout informed me of the raja's martyrdom and that the queen was fleeing towards Virupatchi."

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"Early morning," he replied.

"No, Vadhyar told me only by mid-morning," the rani countered.

"It must have been Manickam's treacherous scouts at work. So I set out for Virupatchi but encountered many enemy soldiers along the way; by afternoon my retinue had to hide from them. This route is crawling with enemies, my lady," Appa explained. "We decided instead to return via Natham and take a lesser-known path. But at Kottampatti, my soldiers were ambushed and slain while I barely managed to escape."

The rani gasped in horror but then folded her hands and gazed up at the night sky murmuring gratitude to Goddess Raja Rajeswari.

"Your Majesty, it was fortunate that I found you here. Were you following the Natham route?"

“Yes; Vadhyar specifically instructed us,” Kuyili interjected anxiously.

“Poor man! He must have been misled by Manickam,” Appa lamented.

“There is another rarely used route—it’s longer but safer," Appa continued earnestly. "What should normally take just a few *nazhigais* could now stretch into nine or ten at least."

“Whatever you say, Appa,” agreed the queen.

“This path will lead us through smaller villages like Thuvarankurichi and Ayyalur.” Appa watched as she nodded in understanding.

“Good, so you grasp what I'm saying,” he sighed heavily.

“And importantly," he added, "it won’t pass through Madurai but will go around it on the northern side.” Kuyili smiled brightly at this news.

Though midnight loomed above them now, their entourage mounted their horses eagerly and set off down this new path while avoiding Kottampatti entirely. The warm air brushed against their faces as they rode over cracked earth without dampening their spirits. Lying flat against his horse's back in an attempt to rest, Appa felt several concerned gazes upon him from the women warriors nearby as they pressed forward through long stretches of dusty trails dotted with clusters of huts amid wild expanses of land untouched by man’s hand.

Under Kuyili's orders and after safely avoiding Kottampatti, they urged their horses onward with fierce determination—howling and pulling with all their might for speed's sake—navigating forests thick with underbrush and algae-laden ponds while avoiding thorny shrubs despite darkness enveloping them like a shroud. For a time during their flight into safety, Appa sank into deep slumber; his face relaxed as if held by dreams that promised peace amidst chaos surrounding them.

The male soldier leading the way clutched a fire torch; despite his weary eyes threatening to close, he willed himself to stay alert. The women warriors remained vigilant alongside Kuyili, who had assumed responsibility for protecting both the queen and princess. Sacks filled with clothes, food, and weapons hung from either side of their steeds—only as heavy as what a horse could bear—these noble animals being their sole means of escape.

Snakes slithered along pathways they crossed at nightfall; however, the galloping horses remained oblivious to them—neighing as if even they comprehended the urgency of their flight and cooperated fully with their riders. For once, Kuyili mused that one could rely on animals but not human beings. One by one, warriors took turns sleeping while others kept watch during their frantic ride. The little princess, nestled against her mother, lay flat like Appa in slumber, blissfully unaware of her surroundings. A peaceful smile graced her lips; her face radiated brightness despite the weariness of the day's trials and exhausting journeys.

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Virupatchi was the name of a Palayam—province. Rani Velu had glimpsed it several times while traveling to Dindigul for weddings and ceremonies at the manor of Venkatappa, the then governor of Dindigul. The fragrant jasmine fields were impossible to overlook, with clusters of tiny white flowers greeting travelers, thriving under the relentless sun yet offering a soothing sight. However, the Sivaganga rulers had never set foot in Virupatchi; instead, two *nazhigais* on horseback from there, at Dindigul, Venkatappa hosted ceremonies, inviting numerous royals to their functions. The Mysore Maharaja appointed the governor of Dindigul, which encompassed eighteen Palayams, Virupatchi being one among them. Now, it was governed by Hyder Ali's ally.

As the entourage arrived from the southern edge of the province, Rani Velu suddenly grasped why Gopal Nayakar held such pride for this arid land. Gopal led Virupatchi and descended from military chieftains who once ruled in service to Maharaja Krishna Deva

Raya of Vijayanagara; he found great esteem and fulfillment in his freedom as a leader. Subsequently, the provincial leaders rose in rebellion against the Mysore Maharaja, rejecting the demands for higher revenues and seeking refuge under Hyder Ali, who welcomed them with open arms. Among these leaders was Gopal Nayakar.

The landscape was neither tranquil nor particularly beautiful—broad pastures dotted with cows and goats grazed alongside a glistening stream that wound its way through dry terrain. In fact, it resembled an even drier expanse than her own kingdom's outskirts—perennially thirsty for water with cracked earth and prickly bushes scattered across the parched Dindigul lands.

Just last year, Gopal Nayakar's father had passed away; his ashes were immersed in the Kodaganar river at Dindigul. There stood a large stone inscribed with his name overlooking the fort—a massive structure fortified with double walls designed to withstand heavy artillery fire. The residents felt secure within its shadow and paid little mind to their land's fertility or lack thereof. Adding to this sense of security were the ironsmiths who generated substantial income through their renowned Dindigul locks. By the time word reached Sivaganga about Gopal's father's death, both cremation and thirteen-day funeral rituals had already concluded.

A throng gathered along the sides as Rani Velu entered the expansive palace street; Kuyili surveyed the people with a smile playing on her lips when she spotted a fellow spy friend who had earlier once provided her with some valuable information. But, her smile faded when she noticed Vadhyar standing at the gates wielding his Silmbam. Medium-built and muscular with dark skin, Vadhyar commanded respect as Rani Velu's *guru*; she regarded him with deep reverence despite Kuyili's ambivalence towards him, which was a mix of respect tinged with disgust at his greedy gaze. Rumor had it that he resided in a humble hut on Sivaganga palace's outskirts—not wealthy by any means—though the rani occasionally showered him with gifts. He claimed an ill wife consumed all his funds for her treatment; yet Kuyili suspected gambling might be his true vice.

The entourage arrived at Virupatchi palace gates and dismounted gracefully onto the porch. Gopal Nayakar's wife bowed and stepped forward to clasp the rani's hand with an expression steeped in pity while the rani offered only a half-hearted smile in return before nodding slightly. Gopal's silvery hair contrasted sharply against his dark violet tunic adorned by an *angavastram* draped over his arms; despite his age, he remained lean with a flat stomach cinched into a waist tie. His face lit up upon seeing her as he exclaimed warmly, "Welcome to Virupatchi, Your Majesty!"

The rani folded her hands respectfully towards Gopal Nayakar—the province leader—and then turned slightly towards Kuyili beside her as Gopal addressed her too: "You too, Kuyili." She stood there surveying family members and servants alike while likely pondering where exactly those Maruthu brothers might be. Gopal hoisted Vellachi onto his shoulders, and she wrapped her arms around his neck in a playful embrace.

Dawn was just breaking in Virupatchi, with the orange sun's rays flickering through the lingering shadows of early morning. The cool air still held a hint of chill, prompting villagers to fill their bowls with steaming gruel before the heat set in. They had traveled from distant corners of the province, eager to witness the rani and the extraordinary event about to unfold. The palace verandah gleamed after being swept and washed with cow dung water, intricate Kolam patterns decorating the floor like delicate lacework.

The Maruthu brothers hurried forward, bowing deeply. "Please forgive us, Your Majesty. We couldn't rise earlier due to tending to our wounds." The rani nodded graciously, her expression inviting them closer. "There is much for you to tell me," she said, glancing at Vadhyar as he hurried to her side.

"Of course, Your Majesty. We were unable to meet you before our departure. I had many arguments with my brother regarding leaving you at Kollungudi palace; we felt utterly helpless that we could not protect the king." Periya's voice cracked as he added, "We are filled with sorrow, Your Majesty," tears streaming down his

face like rain on parched earth. It was a stark contrast to his usual imposing figure; watching him cry like a child tugged at heartstrings but also sent ripples of laughter among the women warriors and Kuyili.

Gopal and his wife stood by, witnessing this display of loyalty but feeling an overwhelming wave of grief take over them as well. Gopal had greeted her warmly but refrained from showing too much curiosity or interest; he understood that she was engulfed in mourning after losing her husband just yesterday—a precarious balance for someone in his position as a provincial leader hosting a queen.

"Please take some time for yourself; this is your palace now," Gopal offered gently. "Everything here is yours to command. I heard about how harrowing your journey was and how narrowly you escaped those enemy soldiers' grasp. Make yourself comfortable and let me know if there's anything you require." As he spoke of her recent ordeal, sadness clouded her features again; she turned away quickly, tears shimmering in her eyes.

Sensing the fragile atmosphere, Gopal bowed slightly and gestured towards rooms on his left. "These chambers are prepared for you and your retinue, Your Majesty. My wife and I will attend to your needs personally." Just then, a lizard perched on the wall made a tutting sound—a good omen—and Gopal instinctively tapped on the wooden pillars nearby.

Once alone in her room, the rani sank into despair. She had lost her mother during childhood and later mourned her father after marriage along with a beloved father-in-law—but never had she faced such darkness as today's sorrow brought upon her heart.

Outside, summer blazed relentlessly under an unyielding sun that seemed indifferent to her pain; it cast no light into her soul whatsoever. And now her husband—what more could be taken from her? They hadn't even allowed her the dignity of mourning over his body or understanding why they sought to eliminate both

her and their child. Did they see her as a threat? Or did they simply wish to capture and humiliate another queen like those up north?

A whirlwind of thoughts tangled in her mind: Why had Smith ordered the attack despite accepting the raja's explanation? Or was he simply unaware of the schemed ambush? If that were true, how could the English collaborate with the prince to launch an assault in direct defiance of Smith's commands? Was it merely a ploy to pilfer temple gold? Would they really assassinate a king for mere riches hidden within sacred walls? How could their formidable army of ten thousand be vanquished so swiftly? Was it solely due to the English's advanced weaponry and military strategy? Or was there treachery at play? Or perhaps both?

The Maravas were always eager for combat; even the farmers, blacksmiths, cowherds, servants, and common folk would rally to swell their ranks. Yet all that resolve crumbled in a single day, leaving her now hiding in Virupatchi. Too many questions lingered with no answers—none at all. At least not yet.

The rani felt exhaustion seep deep into her bones. Though her stomach rumbled emptily from neglecting Udaiyal's gruel, it remained silent. She lay back but found sleep elusive; a restless mind relentlessly pursued analysis and clarity. Pushing herself upright, she cradled her forehead in her hand, yet even this small motion brought no peace.

As a king's daughter—strong, mature, resolute—she had been trained for perilous situations and believed herself prepared. But no amount of training could brace one for life's unpredictable blows; she understood that now. Finally, tears cascaded down her cheeks without ceasing for hours. Knocks on the door requesting food or water were met only by silence and muffled sobs. Ever vigilant at her door, Kuyili took it upon herself to guard and nurture the queen.

Questions spiraled into doubts: Did I love my husband? Do I still love him? Yes and no—yes until he took another woman as his own. But wasn't that customary? My grandfather had multiple wives; my father likely entertained concubines too. Am I grieving

my husband's death because he might have lived longer? Or is my sorrow rooted in my own plight and loss? She began to probe herself in an attempt to emerge from despair: Why am I feeling this way? Ultimately, she distilled it down to two uncertainties: mourning her husband or lamenting her circumstances—were they not intertwined?

For four days she had neither eaten nor ventured outside. Kuyili's gentle knocks went unanswered, but she pressed her ear against the door and heard the rani gasping or weeping softly within. On the sixth day after tragedy had struck, dark clouds rolled over what had once been a brilliant blue sky as sheets of rain swept in from the southwest. A fierce wind whipped through from the west, driving rain sideways into rooms like an uninvited guest breaking through windows. Yet this sudden downpour ignited joy among villagers who rushed into streets laughing and dancing beneath the deluge. The rani stepped outside cautiously; Kuyili smiled briefly before concern replaced it upon seeing the rani's sunken eyes and thinning frame. Quickly rushing back into the kitchen, she returned with mango pulp which the rani accepted gratefully as Kuyili watched with anxious compassion while she ate slowly.

"What have you decided, my queen?" Gopal asked gently.

"Nothing."

He remained silent, unsure of how to respond.

"For now, I want to perform the thirteen-day rituals for my husband," she declared.

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'll make the necessary arrangements," he replied.

Each day over the next week, priests arrived in a steady stream. A young brahmin boy volunteered to assist with the ceremonies. Lumps of cooked rice were meticulously formed, representing the deceased, and offered in reverence. On the tenth day, a substantial mound of rice was honored by the rani, her daughter, Appa, and the Maruthu brothers as funeral feasts unfolded around them. The skies

unleashed rain throughout that week, soaking everyone involved in the rituals. The town's dry earth absorbed it eagerly, preventing puddles from forming on its surface. However, open courtyards of tiled homes suffered some flooding, making it difficult for residents to tend their fields or venture out for supplies. The community's daily lives were undeniably disrupted. Yet on that thirteenth day, a large gathering filled with people from across the province united to share in a feast as an expression of support for their queen, who prayed fervently to Goddess Raja Rajeswari while expressing gratitude for being able to carry out these final rites for her husband.

"Unusual rain this summer season, Your Majesty," remarked Gopal.

"It was my husband who came to witness these rituals; I am relieved he can now find peace in heaven," she replied softly.

"Indeed, Your Majesty," Gopal said eagerly as he sought insight into her future plans. He noticed a slight brightness returning to her expression and a hint of relief sparking within her eyes.

The rani hesitated for a long moment as she wrestled with her thoughts. How could she confide in Gopal about the turmoil churning within her? Her mind was clouded with confusion about what course of action to take—should she follow tradition and immolate herself on the funeral pyre—*Udankattai*—or should she choose life to protect her daughter?

She knew voicing such feelings would be beyond Gopal's understanding and perhaps even incomprehensible to her own people. So instead of revealing any firm decisions, she deflected gently: "I'm too weary right now; it has been an exhausting fortnight and my head is pounding." Every word rang true; fatigue weighed heavily upon her brow and temples throbbed mercilessly from sleepless nights spent wrestling with grief and uncertainty. Rising slowly, she nodded at Gopal with a faint smile that masked deeper sorrows beneath—a silent farewell laced with unspoken pain.

Appa sensed something more profound lingering beneath the surface despite their silence—a heaviness that clung stubbornly

to her spirit like an unwelcome shadow. Gopal exchanged glances with the Maruthu brothers; they turned expectantly towards Appa who looked caught off guard by their scrutiny and rolled his eyes in resignation at their implied request: "Why me?"

"Aren't you supposed to be her father figure?" one brother growled back defensively.

"It's best we speak with Kuyili now," Appa suggested firmly while Vadhyar nodded in agreement.

"Then let us find Kuyili without delay," urged one of the brothers.

"Hold on now! We're not dealing with just anyone here; we're speaking about our queen," Appa reminded them cautiously.

"What difference does it make?" grunted the brothers.

"It makes a lot of difference, my sons. One must handle a lady with gentleness. Allow her to express herself for a time, then appeal to her sensibilities or feelings. Only then will she listen," said Appa.

The brothers stared at Appa in disbelief, their expressions frozen in confusion. They felt ill-prepared to navigate the complexities of women and lacked the sophistication required for such interactions. Rooted in place, their eyes widened with shock as they gaped at Appa, grappling with how they would manage under these new circumstances. They had mastered every nuance of the male psyche—from following orders to rallying troops for battles and wars. Never before had women issued battle commands or participated in training exercises; they were absent from both combat and preparation alike. Women had long been perceived as indecisive and weak-willed.

Even now, the rani had yet to assert any authority or make decisions of her own. After a moment's pause, an even larger concern clouded their minds: what if the rani chose not to fight back? What then would they do?

■

# *Sivaganga, 1772*

Hot winds howled southward over the sand-strewn earth, whipping through leafless branches that bent and thrashed about wildly, shedding what few leaves remained clinging on for dear life. The conditions were unbearable; summer winds scorched like fire while stillness brought even more discomfort. Sturdy branches swayed precariously in gusts before crashing into the parched ground below. With each violent swing, brittle branches, riddled with termites, cracked ominously, hanging by splinters until a strong gust sent them teetering downwards—dirtied grounds already littered with dry foliage only grew messier as sweepers wrestled against the relentless wind with their coconut stalk brooms. Ten of Gopal's maids swept tirelessly across the mansion grounds, attempting to clear debris that seemed determined to return almost instantly to the stone pathways beneath their feet.

"We need to understand the situation in Sivaganga," Periya Maruthu shouted, his voice struggling against the howling wind. It was *Aadi*, a Tamil month marked by an absence of weddings and other auspicious occasions. The locals often said that during *Aadi*, the winds were so fierce they could sweep away even a grinding stone. Chinna gestured towards the distant rock fort, which loomed like a colossal elephant lying in slumber. "We'll make our way to the fort first thing tomorrow morning before heading to Sivaganga," he yelled back. Periya waved him off, signaling that he would go alone. Vadhyar also expressed a desire to join him, but Periya firmly declined.

The journey was supposed to be a mere six *nazhigais* from the fort, yet it would take all day to navigate through dense forests and enter the now perilous lands of Sivaganga. Upon crossing into the borderlands, Periya tethered his horse securely and picked up a stick for support. He transformed his appearance into that of an elderly man, reluctantly trimming his prominent mustache and closing his eyes as he shaved off its curled ends; he even dusted limestone into his hair to give it a silvery hue.

As he approached a young blacksmith laboring at his forge, pumping air into glowing embers, Periya hobbled over with feigned frailty and asked, "What happened to the fort here?"

"It was ruined just last month," the blacksmith murmured.

"How did that come about?"

"Why do you want to know? Who are you?" The young man stood tall with hands on hips.

"Just an ordinary fellow collecting wood from the forest on the other side. I heard whispers of some battle here and felt curious," Periya replied soothingly.

"Well, there was no battle at all. The soldiers from Sivaganga and villagers abandoned the fort to prevent bloodshed. They scattered into nearby towns to escape death."

"Oh really? But I thought those soldiers were brave enough to die for their king," Periya remarked.

A wave of shame washed over the blacksmith as he suddenly looked downcast. Moments later, he lifted his gaze slightly and admitted, "Yes, they were indeed brave and would have fought valiantly for their king. But when they learned that their king had been killed and the queen had fled, they felt compelled to flee themselves."

Periya lowered his head in sorrow but soon lifted it again to say softly, "Poor queen; what options did she have? And there's also her little princess to protect."

"It's all over now," came the man's reply. "The enemies torched the fort; they claim it's unnecessary since this village is no longer on the border but part of Arcot."

"Tell me one thing: were you ever a soldier?" Periya asked in a hushed tone.

The young man froze momentarily as uncertainty gripped him; could he trust this old man? He remained silent.

"Don't be alarmed; I'm not your enemy—just an old man wandering through tough times. Do I look like someone who poses a threat?"

"I don't know whom to trust anymore," he confessed quietly.

"Look closely at my face—do I not resemble a Marava?" Periya straightened himself proudly.

The blacksmith's expression shifted dramatically as realization dawned on him; mouth agape in astonishment, he began to shout until Periya quickly placed a hand over his mouth and urged silence. Overwhelmed with emotion, the man fell at Periya's feet and wept openly, saying, "I'm grateful you've taken time to check on us."

Helping him back up gently, Periya asked earnestly, "Will you stand with us if we choose to pursue a reclamation soon?"

"Absolutely yes!" The blacksmith beamed widely in response.

"Good then! Now tell me precisely what transpired." The young man recounted how Arcot soldiers stormed into their village expecting slaughter only to find it deserted. When questioned by them about occupancy at the fort, villagers had convincingly lied about its abandonment—a feat no one could quite fathom how they achieved so successfully—leading their enemies back towards safety at their palace instead of pressing forward for confrontation against an empty stronghold.

The enemies arrived with an English battalion, a force far beyond the soldiers' capabilities. In response, they skillfully evacuated the fort and assumed the identities of villagers. Alongside this ruse, he had also acquired the skills of a blacksmith.

"Alert the other men, but do so quietly. All is not lost yet, so keep your spirits up, understand?" Periya commanded.

"Yes, my lord," the man replied with a bright smile.

Disappearing into the thick jungle, Periya untied his horse and urged it northward. Approaching Tiruchirapalli, where the English army had amassed in daunting numbers at the cantonment, he noted how vulnerable the northern borders had become. The fate of the four thousand soldiers he had personally dispatched from the palace to secure those borders weighed heavily on his mind. Had they been slaughtered? How could they simply vanish without a trace? Aware that the borders were now more treacherous than ever, Periya, undeterred by fear, pressed onward. This time, he donned tattered garments and adopted a noticeable limp for disguise. He even bleached his chest hair to elicit sympathy from any villagers he might encounter.

To his astonishment, patrols of the prince's soldiers roamed these lands frequently; entering the villages was not as simple as it had been in previous encounters near the western forest. To complete his beggar façade, he picked up a clay plate licked clean by stray dogs. Approaching the soldiers with this filthy dish in hand, he pleaded for scraps of food. Disgusted by his appearance and demeanor, they quickly dispersed.

Continuing further into the village and raising his voice, he called out loudly, "Amma, please grant alms." Seeing a dark man, a woman emerged from one of the huts carrying remnants of old food. "Amma," he asked urgently, "what has happened with all those soldiers?"

"What can we say? It's all over now," she replied flatly.

"Was there a battle?" he pressed.

"If there had been one," she lamented, "I would have preferred that."

Periya's brow furrowed in confusion as she continued. Last month saw Marava soldiers sweeping through border villages; then

just weeks ago, they dismantled their cannons and weapons before wandering off aimlessly. Some men on horseback had ordered their retreat under claims of being messengers from the king, bearing orders sealed with royal insignia. Many disappeared into nearby forests and never returned—likely murdered—while others were enticed to join forces with the English at the cantonment. The military chief had vanished entirely when scouts rushed back to report to the palace on horseback; perhaps foul play was involved—God only knew what truly happened.

"But weren't there at least a few thousand?" Periya inquired.

"Disbursed in different directions," she responded softly.

A wave of disappointment washed over him; it felt like a physical blow. How could Manickam possess access to the king's seal? He pondered deeply about this unfolding conspiracy.

"Are you alright?" she asked gently as she noticed him lost in thought.

"No, lady," he responded with sincerity. "But I will be soon." The woman regarded him with bemusement at this tall yet weary stranger; however, before her curiosity could linger any longer upon him, he slipped away into obscurity.

His face twisted in anguish, and his heart shattered once more the following day when he approached the Kollungudi palace. Periya climbed a sturdy tree on the hill that overlooked the grounds. Unlike the other border forts, the palace still stood, untouched. Enemy soldiers patrolled its periphery, and Periya felt a deep sense of sorrow as he observed women in *burqas* moving about within the palace's confines—the very rooms where the rani and her ladies once strolled freely. From his vantage point among the branches, he watched soldiers bustle in and out, hauling large wooden crates, heavy metal boxes, gleaming brass utensils, chopped wood, and various other supplies.

The next day brought an even more harrowing sight as Periya made his way to the Sivaganga palace. A putrid odor assaulted his

senses; mounds of burning wood littered the ground while injured prisoners were lined up like cattle—many unable to support their own weight. On the filthy streets, dismembered arms and legs lay scattered without anyone bothering to gather them for burial or cremation. Crows, dogs, and vultures jostled for position to feast on the remains while swarms of flies buzzed incessantly around them.

At street corners where ancient banyan trees loomed overhead, some bodies hung grotesquely from their branches. Periya had never encountered such horror before; it was unthinkable to leave anyone hanging like that—even as punishment. If one thought him shocked, it would be a gross understatement. The seasoned warrior found himself grappling with unspeakable atrocities: fields ablaze with fire, no food or water in sight; wells and ponds lay parched under a merciless sun. Even trees stood barren against an unforgiving sky. His stomach churned at this eerie appearance until he could no longer contain himself; stepping aside, he retched violently.

As he forced himself upright again to continue walking, an unexpected scene caught his eye. He wandered towards the pond where he and Chinna had shared moments not long ago on those steps behind the palace. From there, he could survey the marshes where palace servants resided. To his surprise, their huts remained intact—perhaps deemed too insignificant for either the prince's soldiers or Englishmen to destroy or pillage. The inhabitants of those marshlands belonged to lower social strata but were not untouchables living near crematoriums outside town; yet still considered beneath notice by their conquerors—a perplexing truth that weighed heavily on Periya's mind.

A figure emerged from one of those huts and began approaching him with purpose. Even from afar, Periya sensed that this man radiated joy at seeing him again. Though part of him wanted to slip away unnoticed into hiding lest anyone discover his presence here, another part yearned to remain visible and confront this familiar face.

"Sire! My lord! Periya Maruthu!" gasped the man between labored breaths.

Periya recognized him as a vegetable and meat cutter employed by the palace; reverence etched across his bowed head as he addressed Periya—the general of Sivaganga's army—though accepting such respect felt foreign to him still.

"Yes, my man," Periya replied.

"With God's grace you're alive! We are all so grateful," came the cutter's heartfelt exclamation.

In an instant, another familiar face joined them: the dog trainer appeared beside him with hands folded in respect while disbelief flickered in his eyes at witnessing their general alive once more; tears brimmed in both men's eyes.

"Please see what has become of our palace and our town," implored the cutter through sobs. "The enemies came in droves—they beheaded villagers… raped women… even killed children." Overcome with grief at these horrors recounted before him, Periya embraced him tightly before welcoming in another wave of sorrow as the dog trainer joined their mournful embrace.

"Their people are everywhere, all throughout our kingdom, sire. They have seized every grain store in town and emptied the palace granary; they even took the livestock. The surrounding fields lie charred and blackened. We live in constant fear that they might strike again, taking what little we have left and slaughtering us all, my lord," said the cutter. "Thanks to the swamp, we remain unharmed." As he spoke, the dog trainer untied his turban and wrapped it around his waist, standing in deferential courtesy.

"But for how long can we rely on that? Once they establish their presence in the palaces and forts, they may very well turn on us." Periya's expression softened as he nodded slowly, his gaze drifting towards the murky waters of the swamp. After a brief silence, he asked, "How many of you are here?"

"About a hundred."

"Can you pack up and leave this place?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you all vanish at once, it will raise suspicions among our enemies. Moreover, if a hundred of you set off together, you'll be easily spotted and likely killed."

"We can depart in smaller groups," offered the cutter.

"You both can come with me immediately; then the others can follow in small batches," Periya decided.

"Of course, sire. We will inform them to leave in groups of four or five," replied the cutter.

"Do you still have dogs?" Periya inquired of the dog trainer.

"Yes sire. We have ten dogs. Regardless of my own meals, I ensure they are fed," answered the keeper.

"Ten will suffice for now; we can breed them to increase the numbers later," Periya stated decisively. After nodding in agreement, they fell silent as Periya reflected on their situation. In better days past, he had been a dog trainer himself; he cherished those Mandai dogs—warriors trained to disable enemy soldiers by targeting their legs, thighs, shins, and vulnerable parts with deadly precision.

Mandai dogs are known for their intelligence and fierce nature; they are instinctive guard dogs brimming with energy. Larger and more robust than the average dog, they possess a deep chest and sturdy, broad legs. Their coats display various shades of brown and gray, often accented by striking white markings. Highly obedient, these dogs excel as hunters and protectors of flocks. This resilient breed boasts good health and durability, requiring minimal grooming due to their short hair. While Periya delighted in offering them meat, he knew the dogs were also content with simple gruel.

The duo wiped their faces clean as a long silence settled around them. Periya let out a heavy sigh before finally meeting their gaze. "How's the queen, sire?" one of them inquired.

"She has escaped unscathed; glory to Goddess Raja Rajeswari," Periya replied.

"Where is she?" came the next question.

"I'll inform you later when we convene in the forest," he assured them.

"The enemies have placed a bounty on her majesty's head, sire," said the cutter earnestly.

"Is that so?" Periya responded with rising concern.

"Yes, my lord. Since they failed to kill her, they're attempting to threaten the remaining villagers, hoping we will reveal her location," whispered the dog trainer anxiously.

"Did you know that the prince surrendered the Sivaganga palace to the English?" Periya raised his eyebrows in surprise at this news.

"The English have transformed it into a garrison where they're stockpiling weapons."

Periya clenched his fists around his sheath, teeth gritted in anger at this betrayal.

"It seems Smith has overlooked Bonjour's transgressions after our kingdom was handed over to the English on a silver platter by the Arcot prince."

His thoughts drifted back to images of bloodied soldiers shackled under the relentless sun. "Quickly gather everything you can find—don't forget the hounds," he ordered urgently as they prepared to meet him at the forest near Ariyakurichi where he had secured his horse. "Keep your actions discreet," he cautioned before dismissing them.

A long line of bullock carts formed near the palace gates caught his attention as he squinted to scrutinize their cargoes closely. He soon noticed another line of carts stationed at the back gate; realization dawned upon him that palace treasures were being hastily removed along with palm leaf manuscripts and financial records that documented their history.

Disappointment washed over him momentarily until a new sound broke through—the scraping of metal against wood revealed that these carts were laden with all manner of weapons, including rifles among them. Later that evening, Periya mounted his horse with determination while behind him trailed both cutter and dog trainer accompanied by ten Mandai hounds racing westward towards Virupatchi.

◆

The following day, Periya was taken aback to see a substantial group of villagers lingering uncertainly at Gopal's mansion gates. "Who are you all?" he inquired.

"We are the families of the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our Sivaganga kingdom," they responded in unison. The crowd was resolute in their desire to meet the rani, who remained secluded in her chamber. Periya and Appa shook the heavy iron chain that secured the door at its top. Her voice echoed clearly: "Come in." After bowing respectfully, Appa began, "Your Majesty, please share your decision with us."

"What do you expect from me, Appa? I am a defeated queen without wealth, land, or loyal subjects. My husband is dead, leaving me a widow with the responsibility of caring for my daughter. What can I possibly do without resources?"

"Your Majesty, only you have the power to act now," Periya urged.

"I'm contemplating the *Udankattai* sacrifice," replied the queen.

"Please don't say that!" Appa exclaimed in alarm.

"Why not, Appa? I am a refugee with nothing left to call my own," she countered.

"And what about Vellachi? If you go through with the *Udankattai*, who will look after her?"

"You will take care of her, Appa," she insisted.

"What about our kingdom?" Appa pressed. "Can't you at least try to reclaim it?"

"With ten thousand soldiers at his command, even the king couldn't prevail against them. What can I possibly do?"

"It's not just about numbers, Your Majesty; it was treachery that brought us here," Appa corrected gently.

"Yes, fine. But how can we be sure there isn't a traitor among us now?" asked the rani.

"Let's start with good faith and remain vigilant for any traitors," said Appa reassuringly.

She remained unconvinced. A moment later, Periya spoke up: "Amma, are you not a mother? Are we not your subjects?"

The rani shifted uncomfortably. "My son, everything is stacked against us. What can I do?"

"Amma, please step outside and witness for yourself. I've shared everything I saw during my journey back to Sivaganga palace. Our people are suffering greatly—doesn't that matter to you? Moreover, many are ready to fight back; they come here daily from our kingdom seeking help. Please emerge from your room; we need you." Periya pleaded earnestly.

On the mansion's verandah stood a large crowd cheering for their queen. Vadhyar stared wide-eyed at this gathering as the rani positioned herself at the entrance and scanned the sea of faces before her—people of all ages, caste, and classes stood united in their support for her leadership. Tears glistened in their eyes as they bowed deeply before her presence. A surge of emotions washed over her like a tidal wave; she straightened her posture as clarity illuminated her face.

After a brief yet intense pause filled with anticipation, Rani Velu declared loudly: "We will reclaim our kingdom! They shall pay for what they've done! Long live Sivaganga! Long live Sivaganga!"

The crowd picked up on her fervor and echoed back with renewed confidence and vigor: "Long live Sivaganga! Long live Rani Velu Nachiyar!"

Rani Velu proclaimed,"I hereby declare an all-woman army; it shall be named Udaiyal army in honor of our female martyr, Udaiyal."

■

# *Fort St. George, December, 1772*

The East India Company flag flapped in the wind, and the sharp notes of the bugle call sliced through the air as Umdat-al-Umara, the Arcot prince, stomped through the fort's entrance. This was not his usual covert entry; he typically slipped in through back doors, eavesdropping on whispers of intrigue. The harsh metallic sound signaled day's end, with the evening sun casting a warm glow on polished rifle butts and glossy black boots of vigilant soldiers. Yet, the prince paid little heed to these surroundings. He was more agitated than usual—his anger simmering beneath the surface.

The Arcot Nawab had foolishly bestowed Madras to the English, who had erected their buildings along the coast—a place no king ever deemed worthy of attention, reserved only for impoverished fishermen. But that wasn't his primary source of irritation; it was infuriating to witness the English thrive in this land. Today, however, an additional reason for his brusqueness clouded his kohl-rimmed eyes.

As he stepped into the front yard, dark clouds rolled in chillingly like a storm brewing on the horizon. The northeast monsoon had firmly taken hold; skies hung heavy with shades from light gray to charcoal black, while gentle drizzles morphed into torrential downpours. Last week's rain had soaked him thoroughly—not enough to deter his visit but sufficient to dampen his mood further as his retainer struggled ineffectually with a royal umbrella. Finally, free from rain that day and eager to confront British generals with fervor, his vexation intensified like thunder rumbling ominously overhead.

An English military attendant guided him through dim corridors and up creaking stairs until they reached an open area where Bonjour stood at attention by a parapet wall on the fourth floor. “Hello there, Your Majesty! Good evening,” Smith greeted from beside Bonjour with a grin that revealed his clean-shaven face. The prince brushed aside pleasantries and small talk without acknowledgment as he felt annoyance rising within him anew—the attendant stifled a snicker at witnessing this tension between them.

With a dismissive wave towards the attendant, Smith ushered Umdat into an inner chamber where two elderly men tugged at a large fan’s rope in unison—one deaf man pulling diligently while another mirrored him on the opposite end. “It’s nice to see your ugly face again, Bonjour,” remarked Umdat with an irritated frown.

Without pause, Umdat launched into a breathless tirade at the end of which, “Why didn’t you eliminate that woman when you had her cornered?” he demanded sharply. Bonjour interjected promptly, “We will do it soon, Your Majesty.” This response only deepened Umdat’s irritation; as merely a major in rank, Bonjour ought not speak unless permitted by superiors—a rule that seemed lost on him today. Smith shot daggers at Bonjour with his glare; if not for Bonjour's cunning ability to capture forts through sheer audacity, he would have long faced reprimand or worse.

“My lord,” Smith replied smoothly yet defensively, “she escaped before we secured Kalaiyarkoil and its gold.”

Umdat felt trapped by this admission—it was he who commanded that temple raid after disposing of the raja himself; by then they had stripped every ounce of treasure over nearly two days while she slipped away unnoticed.

Then another thought struck him suddenly. He turned towards Bonjour with narrowed eyes and snapped irritably: “Now that I have handed over the Sivaganga palace to you, you are wasting time fortifying it instead of hunting her down. You asked for my permission to use the palace because you aided in killing the raja—

you earned it! Yet I clearly instructed you before departing for Arcot: kill her and the little girl!"

Smith gestured subtly for Bonjour to respond calmly as he assuredly said, "Yes, Your Majesty—we will allocate more resources towards locating and eliminating her immediately."

"Find out where she hides! Track down her allies—kill them all! If we falter now or appear weak in Sivaganga's grasp," Umdat warned fiercely, "we risk losing everything—that kingdom is at stake! I expect good news within one week!" With that proclamation echoing behind him as he departed hastily.

Bonjour opened his mouth hesitantly but was cut off by Smith's sharp voice: "Save your excuses for later—we must prioritize uncovering where she lurks."

"Yes sir," responded Bonjour resignedly knowing full well what awaited him now alone with Smith—the facade of camaraderie crumbling under pressure would soon give way once they were alone again amidst verbal assaults from above directed solely at him.

"Why should only the prince appear weak while we allow that woman to gain strength? Our reputation is on the line. What will people say—that the English were stupefied by a mere woman, and a native one at that? Have you considered this, Bonjour? Our English pride will be tarnished," Smith said, fixing his gaze on him.

Speaking with measured calmness, Bonjour replied, "Sir, as per your orders, we have secured the Sivaganga palace. You yourself stated that she wouldn't be able to lift a finger; forget about gathering armies and launching an attack. No English queen has ever fought in a war or even a battle in our history. They may have organized armies and issued commands, but no English queen has taken up arms alongside men as a warrior. So you instructed me to prioritize our defenses first."

Not one to accept defeat—after all, he was a superior officer—Smith clenched his jaw and glared at Bonjour intensely. A heavy silence followed.

"What measures have you taken to find her?" Smith demanded angrily.

"Sir, our spies are currently tracking her movements," Bonjour answered.

"When did they start? And who are they?"

"Sir, we initiated surveillance immediately after the king was killed but slowed down as our focus shifted elsewhere." Bonjour replied with an air of superiority.

"Let's not indulge in false pride. With others, we can afford arrogance, but reality demands acknowledgment here. Among ourselves, let's admit that her existence might spark alliances and cause significant damage to us—like the prince says—now or in the future. It's high time we flush her out." Smith's tone was unyielding.

■

# *Virupatchi, 1773*

Kuyili sat on the stone backrest of the verandah on Gopal's mansion's western side, her gaze sweeping over the families meandering in clusters, their leisurely pace lingering at the front steps of a new yet welcoming establishment. "They have fled from Sivaganga and are eager to join our ranks," Chinna remarked, his eyes fixed on Periya, who absorbed their plight with quiet contemplation. It made sense for these refugees to seek sanctuary here and bolster their forces; reclaiming their homeland hinged upon it. "Or perhaps they come for food," Kuyili interjected.

Over the past six months, refugees had initially trickled into Virupatchi but now surged forth in large numbers. On expansive tracts of land cleared for training flanking both sides of the mansion, about a hundred men had begun rigorous training under the skilled guidance of both brothers. Their families constructed thatched huts further away from the main activity.

Chinna shot her an incredulous look. "Do you really believe they lack loyalty or fighting spirit?"

"Well, if they permit their women to take up arms, then that would indeed demonstrate their loyalty," Kuyili retorted, a teasing smile dancing on her lips as she dismissed Chinna's concerns. Below in the fields, Periya's men engaged in fierce wrestling matches, pairs grappling under the sun's watchful eye. "Look at them wrestling nearly bare except for loincloths," Chinna pointed out.

"Can women do that?" Chinna asked with a dismissive twist of his mouth.

"Who fought off the enemy gang alongside the rani?" Kuyili countered sharply. She raised her chin defiantly and continued, "Who delayed the enemies from reaching us?"

Chinna bowed his head respectfully with folded hands. "Amma, *thaaye*; I concede! You goddesses are formidable!" With a final glance back at her, he dashed towards the fields to test his own wrestling skills. The newly arrived villagers looked up at Kuyili as though questioning whether she was genuinely organizing and commanding a women's army; hushed whispers passed between men and women alike.

As soon as Kuyili rose from her seat, Periya stepped forward and stated earnestly, "I've spoken to them. Let's see if they are willing."

"Didn't I say I would handle it?" Her tone was sharp.

"I only wanted to assist you," Periya replied earnestly.

He genuinely wished to support her efforts; however, Kuyili's mounting frustration left her emotions erratic. "It's fine; I don't require help," she said firmly while raising a hand to halt him.

"That is why men are now open to letting their women learn combat," Periya said with a slight scoff.

"Forgive me, Periya, but I must speak with them."

She left him on the verandah and strode towards the yard, where groups of villagers blinked in surprise at her slender figure and confident gait. "I need your women," she declared, pivoting to face them. "Our all-women army will join the men in fighting the enemy."

An elderly man stepped forward, concern etched on his face. "But it is dangerous to have women fighting at the front, lady."

"My dear father," she countered sharply, "it is far more dangerous to simply support men and risk being defiled in unspeakable ways." A hush fell over the crowd. The villagers exchanged glances before murmuring among themselves, their uncertainty palpable as they regarded Kuyili. "We will see what can be done," one finally said, and she nodded reassuringly.

Periya headed back to the training fields while Kuyili returned to update the rani. "Please don't lose heart, Kuyili," the rani urged softly but firmly. "Periya is also persuading the men. As soon as we have a sizable number, I'll send Vadhyar to train the girls in *silambam*."

Kuyili bowed respectfully and made her way back to the verandah. She descended the steps with care, navigating over uneven gravel under the blazing sun until she reached a distant corner where several girls were skipping rope and adjusting their sarees in preparation for running drills before practicing *silambam* techniques. Nearby, men grumbled as they wrestled; straining muscles was more difficult than wielding weapons.

Amongst them stood Chinna's unmistakable silhouette—taller than his elder brother—barking commands that echoed across the grounds as he directed other men through their exercises. Approaching him, Kuyili said, "We will need to train with swords."

"If you want sword practice," Chinna replied bluntly, "you'll have to wait; we're still waiting for a shipment from the blacksmiths."

"We are not many," Kuyili said defiantly, disregarding his tone.

"In that case," Chinna conceded with a curt nod, "Gopal can spare a few swords for practice." Wiping sweat from his brow, he added, "I'll check with him."

On a blistering late summer morning, regimental exercises for women commenced. Over five hundred women clad in armor marched out after enduring an eight-night regimen: four nights of drills in darkness followed by four days of continuous training both day and night under open skies without cover. The dry heat of Virupatchi served as an unforgiving backdrop that toughened their bodies and resolve. Earlier that month, Periya and Chinna had led these drills across harsher terrains designed to mimic actual campaign conditions—including simulated night assaults.

"What we need are effective war tactics and comprehensive training," Gopal stated during their early discussions, as he shared

insights from his experiences on campaigns against the British with the brothers and Kuyili. "You are undoubtedly skilled in our traditional methods, and while the women can take a few months to reach that level, I will design more rigorous and successful war simulation exercises that will bolster our confidence in facing the British." Gopal and the brothers delved into various war strategies, emphasizing the resilience required to endure them. They exchanged notes, absorbing tactical points from one another. The following day, the brothers initiated training for a diverse group of farmers, blacksmiths, former soldiers, homemakers, and even some thralls.

Everyone—men and women alike—carried a complete set of armor and shields that weighed roughly as much as a sack of rice—about fifty kilos. The chosen terrain was harsh and arid, littered with jagged stones protruding from the ground, while thorny shrubs and low-branched trees punctuated the rocky slopes. Sudden assaults and ambushes were part of their training regimen. The expectation was for the army to maneuver fluidly around obstacles, like water flowing over stones, without breaking their formation.

The trainees were thrust out of their comfort zones; amenities were nonexistent. Rations were slashed in half during the first four days, completely cut off for the next two, and no water was provided in the final two days. Their only sustenance consisted of rice porridge mixed with raw shallots. Night exercises aimed to sharpen their instincts so they could fight by feel rather than sight on uneven terrain. Gopal emphasized these drills in preparation for potential night attacks. According to Gopal and the brothers, these miserable conditions fostered camaraderie among the trainees.

Another grueling exercise involved using their shields to encircle a banyan tree and push it down as they would an enemy in battle. They strained against its formidable trunk, digging their heels into the earth as they heaved and churned dirt beneath them until a small rut formed around it, humping, hurling, and grinding against its immovable mass. Curses flew through the air along with mental anguish as part of their training regimen. The village women who

had fled from Sivaganga kingdom paid little mind to the language; after all, if captured by enemies, they too would face torture like men did.

Some trainees fell ill or felt utterly drained; others contemplated fleeing, but Kuyili and the brothers kept spirits high throughout every exercise and drill. The trio also participated in these demanding routines alongside them.

One morning, Gopal rose early to pray to the sun god after more than six months of rigorous training had passed. Even at dawn's break yielding to summer's bright sunrise, a golden sky streaked with yellow hues unfolded above him while wisps of clouds drifted lazily by—a rare breeze wafting in from the south added a touch of coolness to the warmth.

Servants carried pails filled with water towards guest quarters where the rani, Appa, Kuyili, and the brothers would soon awaken. Vegetables, groceries, and meat were brought into backyards for cooking preparations as an enticing aroma of *upma*—boiled semolina mixed with vegetables—wafted through the mansion's halls. Gopal made his way to the *puja* room where he worshipped deities before ringing a bell and settling down for prayers while reciting mantras aloud.

As guests stirred from sleep one by one, Gopal headed towards Appa's room but found it empty. He searched until he discovered Appa near the backyard washing his hands after finishing his simple breakfast of rice gruel.

"Appa! Why aren't you eating *upma*?" Gopal asked.

"I prefer my gruel; it's all my stomach can handle," Appa replied with a weary sigh.

"You're not old yet, Appa," Gopal said softly, trying to reassure him. "When one gets old, one knows," Appa replied, his voice heavy with experience. He accepted the cloth Gopal offered for wiping his hands.

Gopal said, “We need to talk.” A shadow crossed Appa’s face as they headed towards the verandah. He brushed away the dirt that had settled on the raised platform by the front porch before sinking down onto it with a weary heart. “What is it, Gopal?”

In the front yard, trainees were engaged in exercises under their supervisors' watchful eyes. Gopal scanned their activities before turning back to Appa and saying, “Somewhere private, Appa.”

Appa looked at him thoughtfully and sighed. “Then we have to go to my room upstairs. Climbing these days is a challenge.” Gopal led the way into the hall and turned towards a corner where narrow wooden steps spiraled up to the guest quarters above—once filled with extra furniture and large utensils for festivals until last year. He paused at the stairs, glancing back to see if Appa needed assistance.

“What is it now, Gopal?” Appa asked with mild irritation.

“We must discuss supplies and weapons, Appa.” The old man lowered his gaze momentarily before meeting Gopal's eyes with furrowed brows. Gopal spoke plainly. “You know as well as I do that there isn’t enough food for all the refugees arriving daily. With training underway, we’ll require weapons not only for practice but also for potential battles ahead.”

Understanding dawned on Appa’s face as he exhaled deeply. Uncertainty flickered across his features as he finally lifted his gaze from the ground.

“I promised everything when you came last year,” Gopal began slowly. “I’ve given all I can offer. But it seems that’s still insufficient. As more people from Sivaganga arrive here, our need for supplies and weapons grows urgent. I’ve sourced every bit of produce and weaponry from my province; you know this well.” His voice trailed off into silence.

Another sigh escaped Appa's lips. “I’ll speak to the rani.”

At midday, the rani summoned Gopal, Kuyili, Appa, and the brothers for a conference. Without hesitation, Gopal laid out his concerns clearly: “I have reached out to leaders of neighboring

provinces for supplies; some have responded positively but it's still not enough, Your Majesty. We need a solution."

"Your Majesty," Appa interjected respectfully.

"Please continue, Appa," the rani encouraged.

"I will travel to our neighboring Ramanathapuram kingdom to appeal directly to its king and other *palayakkarars* for support," he stated firmly.

"Appa," the rani responded with concern in her voice, "I cannot allow you to undertake such a journey at your age; let us send messengers instead. And, he is a puppet king of the English."

"It's essential I go myself," insisted Appa earnestly. "We lack diplomats who can handle this delicate task effectively; our current situation demands personal appeal if we are to win them over."

Worry etched itself on the rani's face as she countered gently but firmly: "Your health is declining; we should find someone else."

"Your Majesty," he pressed on urgently, "we are defeated rulers without anyone capable of persuading chieftains or kings for support at this time—nobody wants association with us in our current state of affairs! We must seek help through alliances ourselves."

"I cannot afford to lose you," she said softly but resolutely. "You are invaluable to me; let's wait until we find someone suitable."

"Your Majesty," he implored passionately, "time is critical now! I promise I'll travel safely—please allow me this chance."

The men exchanged glances, and the rani broke the silence. "Very well, Appa. Please take care of yourself." She turned to the brothers, adding, "Assist Appa with the preparations and send your best men to guard him." They nodded in unison.

"Your Majesty, regarding the weapons: we lack sufficient iron to forge them, we have no funds to acquire more metal, no blacksmiths available to craft them, and merchants are hesitant to supply us because they fear the English," Gopal said, his breath held tight.

"Patience, my friend. We will tackle each issue one at a time," replied the rani calmly. After a moment's thought, she continued, "For now, let's concentrate on training with wooden sticks—*silambam*. We can start today. Vadhyar is an expert; he will teach *silambam* and adapt it to the new regimental drills you've been instructing." She paused before adding, "Next, we should begin using *valaris* for our training. The production of *valaris* requires minimal iron compared to other weapons, allowing us to conserve our resources. As for funding and merchants, I trust that Appa will soon forge alliances that bring good news our way. Do these solutions address our concerns?" the rani looked around at her audience.

Gopal's face brightened at her swift solutions. With hands pressed together in reverence, he bowed deeply and said, "It is truly humbling to be in your presence, Your Majesty."

"Until Appa returns," she instructed them firmly, "we shall focus on *silambam* and *valari* training. Once he arrives back here with updates on forging alliances with neighboring kingdoms, we will have a better idea," she concluded as they all bowed in acknowledgment.

Weeks later, when robust cool winds swept away the remnants of summer's heat on a refreshing morning, the rani was jolted awake by a sudden sneeze from her maid. "Sneeze again," Kuyili urged her with concern. "It brings bad luck if you only sneeze once." But despite her efforts, the maid could not muster another sneeze.

"How do you catch a cold when it's so warm outside?" Kuyili asked incredulously as she watched the maid slip away just as Kuyili began to scold her. At that moment, a crow cawed loudly outside their window. "Perhaps we have guests arriving today," Kuyili suggested instead.

Suddenly a gust of wind rattled the chains attached to their sturdy wooden entrance door; its clanging echoed throughout the mansion on that tranquil morning. More noise followed—a servant was knocking insistently at the door—Appa had arrived.

"Bad news right away for you, Your Majesty," Appa announced grimly as he stepped inside. His expression was somber; sensing him crestfallen, she still tried to maintain some cheer around her, even though she felt heavy-hearted listening to him speak.

"The puppet king has predictably said no," Appa continued solemnly. "The local feudal leaders are treading cautiously—they despise the English but feel compelled to submit since they are now their powerful overlords. While they sympathize with us personally," he sighed heavily, "they cannot offer meaningful assistance—only token supplies or horses which won't suffice for any uprising against our oppressors." His eyes shimmered with unshed tears as he finished speaking.

"That is precisely what the English desire—to isolate us completely," replied the rani firmly yet thoughtfully. "By doing so they aim not only to weaken us but also crush our morale entirely." She offered him reassurance even while contemplating how they might navigate this dire situation ahead.

"The province chiefs have clearly stated they cannot meet our demands. I suspect they no longer view us as a credible threat to the British," Appa said, his voice heavy after a long pause, tears glistening on his cheeks.

"What of the merchants we've relied on for years?" asked the rani.

"They are being consistently discouraged from supplying us by the English. The fear that grips our old suppliers is palpable," replied the minister.

"And new merchants?" she pressed.

"Given our vulnerabilities, they're quoting exorbitant prices. Greedy as they are, they seek to exploit our predicament for profit, my queen," Appa lamented.

A sudden weight filled the air. Yet the rani understood this was not a moment for despair. Appa, who usually had solutions for every dilemma, now stood before her empty-handed. They were

at an impasse. A tangled problem was emerging, and if she didn't address it promptly, it would only grow more complicated. With so many people arriving daily from her kingdom, if she failed to provide food and arms for them, their faith in her leadership would wane! They might abandon her entirely, and, with that loss, would vanish any chance of reclaiming her kingdom forever.

After a prolonged silence settled between them, a glimmer flickered in the rani's eyes. Her husband often spoke of Hyder Ali, the formidable Sultan of Mysore. Known for his fierce contempt for both the English and his adversary, the Nawab of Arcot, he embodied the idea that an enemy's enemy could be an ally. Fueled by this realization, she made up her mind to seek Appa's guidance on how to effectively approach the Sultan for support.

◆

Six months passed in a blur. One day, during a meeting with the rani, Appa said, "I sent a letter to Hyder Ali, detailing every aspect of our dire situation, entrusting the swiftest rider to carry it to Srirangapatna. The message was a plea for assistance—an army of five thousand soldiers and an equal number of cavalry. The messenger set off at dawn, cutting through the dense gray mists, and I found myself waiting each day for any sign—a troop dispatched, a token of hope, or even a single word. Yet, as the days dragged on, the only thing that came from Hyder Ali was an oppressive silence. Nothing—no reply, no reinforcements, not even a whisper of news. We have received no response thus far."

"Did the messenger return?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. He wasn't waylaid."

Gopal, who was also present, said, "I will send a letter detailing our situation as well."

A few more months passed. In a subsequent meeting, Gopal Nayakar's voice trembled with disappointment as he lamented, "It is painful that I have not received a reply from Hyder Ali to my messages." The strain in his words hung heavily in the stillness of the street, amplifying the sense of urgency and frustration in the air.

"In that case, I must meet Hyder Ali in person," the rani contemplated. "Please make the necessary arrangements, Appa." With that, she gestured to Kuyili, who hurried off to find suitable male attire for the rani.

■

# *Dindigul Journey, 1774*

After breaking a hundred and eight coconuts in prayer to Lord Ganesha for the removal of obstacles, the rani embarked on her journey to Dindigul during the auspicious month of *Thai*. The Sivaganga people observed a subdued *Pongal*, their festivities muted yet reverent, a nod to tradition. Just last week, Gopal received word from his scouts that Hyder Ali had traveled from Srirangapatna to inspect his forces at Dindigul.

As they awaited the rani's arrival, Gopal remarked, “The journey shouldn’t take more than three *nazhigais* on horseback,” standing confidently beside his horse. Appa, nearby, nodded in agreement.

“It was wise to have sent Princess Vellachi to a secure hamlet high up in the hills," Periya said with palpable relief. "The *siddha* doctor there will ensure her health and safety. I hope her weak stamina improves.”

Suddenly, a flurry of footsteps broke the calm. Gopal and Appa turned to check out the commotion, only to find themselves momentarily puzzled by the rani’s appearance in male attire, which surprisingly suited her. Accompanying her was Kuyili, who urgently implored the rani to allow her to join the expedition, fear etched across her face at the thought of the rani facing danger alone.

The rani waved her concerns away, asserting, “It’s safe all the way; after all, it is Hyder Ali’s dominion.”

“Still, my queen, we should take precautions,” Kuyili insisted, her voice laced with worry. Unable to dismiss her loyal companion,

the rani relented with a slight nod. Kuyili quickly selected a few skilled female bodyguards to accompany them.

As Appa bade goodbye, the cool, misty month infused the group with a sense of cheer. Yet, even as breakfast faded into memory, the sun remained stubbornly hidden behind a blanket of gray, with only fleeting patches of light breaking through. About a *nazhigai* after they had set off at a gallop, they found themselves midway through their journey. Villages gradually transformed into sprawling fields, which then gave way to the desolate outer lands. Ahead lay a dense forest, beyond which lay the outskirts of Dindigul.

Large shrubs flanked the rugged trails, forcing the group to navigate single file. Two bodyguards led the procession, followed closely by Kuyili, then Gopal, the queen, and the Sivaganga diplomats in sequence. A few female bodyguards trailed behind them. "Look over there! I see movement in those bushes," Gopal called out sharply, his voice slicing through the tension. A bullet zipped past the first bodyguard, a stark warning.

In a swift motion, Kuyili yanked the rani's horse to a stop, leaped down from her own mount, assisted the rani to dismount, enveloped her in protective arms, and dashed behind a sturdy tree.

Suddenly, British soldiers clad in red and white emerged from the underbrush, rifles aimed, sending a shockwave of fear through Gopal's chest. He had encountered many battles before, his reactions typically instinctive and practiced. Yet, the element of surprise in an ambush was a new, unsettling experience. For the first time, he understood the dread that must have gripped the king of Sivaganga in similar perilous moments.

Confused, Gopal, Kuyili, diplomats, and the bodyguards took a moment to gather their thoughts before hurling *valaris* towards the English soldiers. By that time, the English had formed a short line of four soldiers, rifles leveled at the group of native warriors. They held their fire; the natives were still about five hundred paces away, just outside effective range.

Behind this first line stood another four soldiers armed with muskets, poised to take their turn once the front line discharged their bullets. They would step in as soon as the first line started to change cartridges. Further back in the formation sat Bonjour on horseback, surveying the scene with a smug grin. He was flanked by a small cavalry of ten men, all watching what they considered an entertainment.

A sudden cacophony of barking erupted from behind them, causing Kuyili, Gopal, and the diplomats to freeze in their tracks, eyes wide with disbelief. They turned in unison, their hearts racing, as Periya's Mandai dogs—trained for swift and brutal assaults—surged forth in formidable waves, ten at a time. Each dog had been raised with the same care and affection a parent would bestow upon their child, and it showed in their fierce loyalty and discipline.

Ingenious! Gopal marveled, recognizing the brilliance of the strategy; it was an unexpected twist that caught everyone off guard, leaving no room for thought as shock gripped their senses.

Unbeknownst to the rani, the Maruthu brothers and their select bodyguards were stealthily shadowing her, accompanied by a pack of twenty Mandai dogs, each one a product of Periya's meticulous training. The sight of twenty ferocious dogs charging towards them sent a jolt of panic through the English ranks, who found themselves momentarily stunned. The hounds, teeth bared and muscles coiled, lunged at the soldiers with a primal ferocity before any triggers could be pulled.

Despite being dangerously close and well within firing range, chaos erupted among the soldiers. Their instincts kicked in, leading them to conserve precious ammunition for humans rather than waste it on the relentless beasts. The dogs, driven by instinct and training, targeted the vulnerable legs and groins of the English troops, their jaws sinking deep into flesh and ripping through uniforms with savage delight.

In a frantic reaction to this unforeseen onslaught, the second line of soldiers fired wildly; stray bullets whizzed past, ricocheting off

the trunks of nearby trees and striking some of the rani's bodyguards. Fortunately, they managed to duck just in time, narrowly escaping the deadly rain of lead.

The relentless pack did not pause after overwhelming just one line of English soldiers—they surged forward, a tide of ferocity, towards the second line as well. The cavalry, sensing the urgency of the situation, broke ranks in a desperate attempt to intervene, their horses snorting and stamping in agitation.

Meanwhile, the bodyguards readied themselves for battle, their eyes narrowing as they faced the English horsemen who brandished their swords with menacing intent. The clash of steel echoed through the air as the rani's guards reveled in the chaos, expertly slashing at arms and cleaving through bodies, all while deftly avoiding harm to the powerful steeds that carried them into the fray. In the midst of the turmoil, Bonjour vanished from his position, spurring his horse into a gallop, urgency coursing through him as he raced away from the chaos.

With every last English soldier driven back in defeat, triumphant cries erupted, ringing out like a victory anthem across the battlefield. Gratitude flowed like a river for Periya's ingenious strategy, with voices raised in exultation: "We never knew our Mandai hounds were so capable!" they exclaimed joyfully, their spirits lifted by the unexpected prowess of their companions. As the Sivaganga group of twenty galloped away towards Dindigul, this time with a fervent sense of urgency, the rani took a moment amidst the clamor to commend Periya for his quick thinking, her eyes sparkling with admiration for his tactical brilliance.

◆

Joseph Smith seethed with rage, his fury palpable in the air. He seized anything within reach on his desk—a pen flew through the air, striking Bonjour, who remained resolute, standing tall despite the assault. "Why would you do that? Don't you realize those lands are under Hyder Ali's control?" he demanded, his voice a booming echo.

"There have been numerous ambushes in that area; it's a volatile border zone. The Arcot Nawab had initiated many skirmishes there himself—I verified it," Bonjour replied, his tone steady. "Besides, she intended to seek support from Hyder Ali. Wouldn't that place us in a precarious position, sir?"

"Even if you had the queen killed, Hyder Ali would seize that as a pretext to attack us. It was a reckless decision. Why didn't you keep me informed? Did you want that reward?"

"No, sir. I aimed to eliminate her quietly and without much ado," Bonjour insisted.

"Well, you've only exacerbated the situation. Wasn't your reputation already tarnished by Sir Robert Fletcher at the India House in London?"

"Yours as well, sir. That Kalaiyarkoil double talk and our alleged treacherous ambush dominated the discussions in the London elite clubs. However, after we clarified our position, our actions were deemed justified, don't you remember, sir?" Bonjour remarked, a cunning smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "And, naturally, the gold," he added in a hushed tone.

"Very well. However, I must file a formal complaint against you. Your reckless actions have resulted in the deaths of over fifteen English soldiers. The Madras Council will see to it that you are sent back to England." Smith's voice resonated with authority, booming through the room. After a brief pause, he leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper, "You understand that I could order your execution for mere insubordination, don't you?"

"I will return to London, sir," Bonjour replied, then added softly, "And so will you."

■

# *Dindigul Fort, 1774*

After what felt like an endless journey, they arrived at last in Dindigul by midday; the imposing silhouette of Dindigul Fort rose majestically against the sky. Its colossal walls, crafted from unyielding stone and bolstered with dual barricades and heavy cannons placed with precision, eased the tension etched on the rani's face.

Rani Velu felt a twinge of concern as what should have been a swift journey stretched longer than anticipated. She sensed an unspoken tension among the others—an electrifying urgency mingled with anxiety about how close death had come. Choosing silence over idle chatter about the weather, she bore her discomfort quietly, praying fervently to the goddess for safe passage and swift arrival at their destination.

As they drew nearer, the rani signaled for her entourage to slow their pace; before them lay the magnificent fort, its grandeur visible from the hillock they had ascended. Welcome showers drummed softly against their cloaks as they galloped towards a tiled house's verandah to seek refuge.

Once the rain subsided, they navigated through the town's muddy streets, careful not to slip as they made their way to the fort. The large rocks that formed its base were surprisingly smooth, resembling polished stones more than rugged terrain; climbing them was a challenge for both man and beast. Perched atop this rocky hill like a colossal slumbering elephant was the fort itself. Just gazing at it filled the rani with a surge of confidence she had

long sought during her years of exile. Undeterred by rain and muck underfoot, she instructed her entourage to circle around the hill first to fully appreciate the impressive sight of the fortress.

A narrow path cut through the smooth rock face, wide enough for three horsemen to ride side by side. As they wound their way up towards the entrance gates, sentries hurried forward to greet them. With a respectful bow, they opened heavy wooden doors that creaked on their hinges as the entourage trotted inside. To her left stood an exquisite row of rooms with walls thick enough that two men could stand shoulder-to-shoulder without touching; on her right were stables housing some of the finest horses she had ever laid eyes upon. A group of Frenchmen worked diligently with rifles nearby while others appeared to be architects measuring walls with great precision.

As hooves clattered against stone paths, they dismounted at an expansive porch where a tall man clad in a white silk robe—cinched at his waist with a *cummerbund*—stood waiting. He wore no jewels. "Welcome, Your Majesty, I am Commander Syed Karki," he said with a deep bow.

They were led into a grand hall where Syed Karki spoke graciously: "You must be weary after your journey." The heavy rains started tapering off as sunlight broke through once again. "Your Majesty, it's time for lunch now. Please follow me to our dining hall near the kitchen."

Syed guided the rani and her entourage down a corridor into a spacious dining area furnished with wooden tables and chairs—a gift from their French allies. Military attendants served them food on large bronze plates crafted with care. After their journey together, every bite was savored by the rani and others while Syed nodded knowingly at her enjoyment.

After lunch, the rani declared to Syed Karki, "I am eager to meet with Sultan Hyder Ali at once."

◆

A month passed without any indication of a meeting with the Sultan. When the rani grew increasingly restless, Gopal suggested she take a stroll through the gardens. "My queen, we have yet to secure an appointment. Until then, the commander has extended an invitation for you to explore this magnificent fort," he urged gently.

"My kingdom is in shambles, defiled by the English, and I am expected to enjoy wandering these halls? How can I find joy when distress looms large?" she replied sharply.

"My queen, please exercise patience. A brief respite won't harm you; there is no shame in seeking solace for a moment," Gopal reassured her.

With a resigned sigh, she acquiesced. "Fine. I'll wait."

One morning, "Would you care for a tour of the fort?" Syed inquired politely.

"Okay," she responded flatly.

Outside soldiers marched in formation accompanied by rhythmic French drums while various detachments engaged in drills led by French instructors. They inspected horses together; the rani felt exhilarated seeing such fine Arabic steeds—strong and healthy animals ready for battle.

"Is there sufficient grass available in this region?" she asked curiously.

"Yes indeed, Your Majesty! Alongside horse gram too! Do not let appearances fool you—the rocky landscape conceals fertile grasslands beyond those fields near town where we receive daily supplies of fodder via bullock cart caravans along with other provisions needed for our stationed army."

"Excellent!"

A broad smile spread across Syed's face as he continued excitedly: "These horses represent our elite light cavalry unit with approximately three thousand more set to join as per Sultan's orders."

They climbed onto the roof of the long row of rooms, where round ventilation holes punctuated the surface. "Sunlight and air," the rani exclaimed, her face lighting up. "There's an abundance of both in this region," Commander Syed replied with a warm smile.

"Wasn't this fort originally constructed by the Madurai Nayakars of the Vijayanagar Empire?" The rani inquired.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. The Sultan added a dome and made some modifications to a few rooms. Now, we have enlisted French architects to further reinforce it and assist with its upkeep," he answered.

"Isn't the Sultan's capital at Srirangapatna? Why is he here?" The rani inquired.

"Your Majesty, he visits often. Twenty years ago, he was named the military commander of Dindigul. Moreover, he has a deep affection for this grand fort; he seeks to draw raw inspiration and renewed energy from its imposing presence," Syed replied with a smile.

At the edge of the terrace, a Frenchman was meticulously applying lime water to the parapet walls, perfecting their finish. With quickened steps, the rani approached him and conversed in fluent French, while Syed listened with amusement at her graceful command of the foreign language. The French worker beamed at hearing a native queen speak so perfectly; Syed beamed at her linguistic abilities.

"We have the French leading our forces. Our heavy cannons, artillery, and grenades are imported from France through Pondicherry and Mahe. But now that route is compromised," Syed said, his voice tinged with sadness.

"That makes it all the more imperative to reclaim Sivagangai from the English; surely, the French would celebrate such an opportunity?" asked the rani.

"More than that. We cannot afford to wait for revenge or for them to strike first, Your Majesty," interjected a passing French grenadier who had come to meet Syed and deliver a message.

As light rain began to fall and chilly winds swept through, darker clouds gathered ominously on the horizon. Within moments, heavier rain would follow. Syed gently ushered the rani back inside towards the hall. The enchanting beauty of her surroundings beckoned her to appreciate it, but an overwhelming guilt for her kingdom's plight extinguished any flicker of joy within her, and rightly so. She could always return once she had reclaimed her throne.

Every day, from her guest house window, Rani Velu observed how busy Sultan Hyder Ali was; his court was thronged with numerous diplomats vying for his attention. Each morning he appeared diligently at court without fail despite his heavy workload. Provincial leaders and minor kings awaited their turn to discuss pressing matters with him; even French advisors could be seen training soldiers within barracks nearby.

Dressed in attire befitting a Sultan yet lacking any ostentatious jewels typical of royalty, he stood out not just for his appearance but also for his keen understanding of people—a skill honed through education comparable to other royals'. Despite having been deceived due to his trusting nature when relying on experts for financial matters, he remained steadfast in his faith in humanity.

Hyder Ali, the ruler of the Mysore kingdom, established his capital in Srirangapatna; however, Dindigul Fort held significant strategic value. Having commenced his military life at Dindigul, he dedicated a substantial amount of time to the fort as well.

◆

One morning, as the sun timidly peeked over the horizon, casting a soft golden light upon the gardens, the rani strolled through vibrant blooms when she caught sight of a regal figure emerging from the queen's quarters. Dressed in elegant silks that shimmered like morning dew, it could very well be the chief queen

herself, thought the rani. She instinctively bowed low. The queen returned her gesture with a warm smile.

Drawn by an inexplicable urge, the rani stepped closer and began speaking in fluent Urdu. The queen's eyes sparkled with delight. “Oh, how lovely! Your Urdu is so fluent,” she praised.

“Your Majesty, my father took great care to ensure I mastered several languages,” replied the rani with pride.

“I’ve heard whispers of your prowess in combat as well,” said the queen curiously.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” came the rani's affirmative response.

“Would you teach me?” asked Hyder’s chief queen eagerly.

“Of course! What would you like to learn first?” asked Rani Velu.

“The stick fight,” came the enthusiastic reply from the queen.

“Certainly! *Silambam* is our unique weapon; it's just a simple stick but can work wonders in skilled hands, Your Majesty,” explained Rani Velu.

“But let me not distract you further. I understand you seek assistance,” said the queen gently.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” A deep sigh escaped from Rani Velu's lips as she felt a weight pressing down on her heart.

The queen nodded knowingly and continued, “Why don’t you attend court today?”

“But how can I do that without an appointment from the Sultan?” questioned Velu anxiously.

“Hmmm... I will make a special request to him on your behalf. You can go to court today; he will acknowledge your presence and speak with you,” assured the queen confidently.

“Your Majesty, your kindness overwhelms me. I am truly touched.”

"Don't express gratitude just yet; it may take some time for him to attend to your concerns. However, he will listen to you today—that much I can promise," she added with a playful wink.

The rani smiled shyly at this encouragement. "I'll do my best for you, Your Majesty."

"And remember—don't forget our lesson on stick fighting!" called out the queen as she gracefully walked away. With renewed determination shining in her eyes as sunlight flooded over everything around her, Rani Velu hurried back to her quarters to prepare for court.

◆

The sun blazed in the clear sky outside the court, prompting Rani Velu to wonder when the proceedings would start. When was Sultan Hyder Ali going to arrive? His queen was already present, so perhaps his arrival was imminent. A wave of relief surged through her when the usher announced Sultan Hyder Ali's entrance. She felt a twinge of annoyance at her momentary lapse: diplomats from all over the southern kingdoms had gathered, as did the Sultana herself; how could she doubt that the Sultan would arrive or not?

Before her, beyond a sea of heads bobbing with anticipation, loomed the royal seat on its elevated pedestal. There sat Hyder Ali, flanked by soldiers wielding peacock feathers to fan him. To his right stood the generals and advisors, while to his left, behind ornate private screens, sat his Sultana.

A hush fell over the assembly as all eyes turned towards him. Hyder Ali entered the room, took a seat, and initiated the proceedings without any exchange of greetings or acknowledgment. Rising from humble beginnings as part of a general's family, he bore only the title of Zamindar—a landlord—in the eyes of the Nizam of Hyderabad until a young king of Mysore conferred upon him the title of Nawab two decades earlier. After toppling the Mysore king, he proclaimed himself Sultan.

With an air of nonchalance, Hyder maintained his composure throughout. Diplomats presented their concerns and sought support while receiving written decrees from him in return. As they voiced their issues one by one, he listened intently and dictated solutions to scribes who transcribed them onto parchment for court records. Tirelessly seated, he addressed each matter methodically before turning his attention to rulers from smaller kingdoms who updated him on their provinces' economies, treasuries, military status, and intelligence reports.

He navigated through topics with detachment while emotions swirled among those gathered: excitement flickered in some eyes while others betrayed anger or concern. Even as feudal lords offered tributes at his feet, he remained impassive—clad in a simple white robe devoid of ornaments—as he attended to business with unwavering diligence.

As tedious as these proceedings were becoming, Rani Velu forced herself to stay engaged; the diplomats and Gopal exchanged glances with admiration for her poise and offered slight bows in acknowledgment. Slowly but surely, daylight began yielding to evening shadows. A weariness crept into her bones as she noted that none seemed aware of a royal lady waiting patiently for an audience with the Sultan—or so it appeared to her keen observation. The diplomats contemplated ways to interject and present their proposal; however, sensing their restlessness like an unspoken current in the air, she gently touched their arms and silenced them with a gesture.

By demonstrating that every case mattered deeply to him, Hyder instilled a sense of significance within each individual present at court—even those who waited impatiently like herself yearned for recognition amid this bustling assembly.

As dusk settled into darkness around them and Hyder considered adjourning until morning—his body shifting slightly from its seat—his gaze landed on Rani Velu, adorned in fine garments and jewels, with dark skin radiating authority. He paused and gestured to the diplomats to step forward.

"Present your grievance to his highness," the usher instructed, glancing at the diplomats. "Your Highness," the diplomats bowed deeply. "We are Maravas of the Sivaganga kingdom. Our realm was unlawfully attacked by the Nawab of Arcot and the English, leading to our usurpation. We implore your assistance in restoring our rightful heir, Rani Velu Nachiyar, to her throne." Behind him, Rani Velu stood with her hands folded in prayerful respect before bowing her head.

Hyder studied the group intently before focusing on the rani, motioning for her to step forward. "Your Majesty," she began in eloquent Urdu, each word laced with emotion. "My husband fell victim to treachery and deceit. Major Smith assured us there would be no conflict; yet Bonjour and the prince of Arcot launched a brutal attack that claimed my husband's life. They ravaged our villages, pillaged our resources, and left a trail of devastation in their wake. Innocent lives were extinguished as we were cast out from our palace. Although I successfully escaped, I am now in hiding. I journeyed to your capital under a disguise, but we were ambushed en route by the English. Fortunately, we managed to fend them off and made our way here in haste." She paused, tears shimmering in her eyes as Hyder's gaze softened.

"Despite living in shadows, we are mustering an army with what little we possess. My compatriots fled Sivagangai and joined me here, unable to endure enemy brutality any longer. However, our means for raising funds and acquiring arms dwindle with each passing day—so too do our hopes." Her voice trembled as she continued, "If anyone can stand against these foes whom they fear most, it is you, Your Majesty," she implored earnestly. "I have come seeking help from you—my brother—to reclaim my kingdom. Your assistance would mean everything to us."

A surge of compassion flickered over Hyder's face; Gopal, the rani, and the diplomats held their breath in anticipation of his reply, but instead, tears began to flow down his cheeks. Perhaps it was witnessing a shadow fall across his wife's expression that

stirred something within him—he could sense the rani's anguish teetering on madness. Her bravery resonated deeply with him; her unwavering loyalty to her late husband and fierce dedication to her people touched his heart.

"First and foremost," he said gently, "please accept my deepest condolences; I empathize profoundly with your plight." He paused for a moment before adding sincerely, "I admire your resolve in seeking justice for your kingdom. I ask for your forgiveness for not responding to your letters. I wondered what good could come from meeting a widow. I appreciate you coming forward for my support; please allow me some time to deliberate on this matter further." He gestured towards his attendants as he continued softly: "Until then, you shall be escorted to the royal guest quarters where you will be well cared for."

◆

For the first time in the last two years, Rani Velu felt a sense of peace sweep through her. The next morning, accompanied by Kuyili, she stepped out of the fort to explore the vibrant market fair. As she passed through the gates, her gaze lingered on the Moghul sentries standing sentinel with rifles reminiscent of English soldiers, though these were distinctly French in design. At the fair, a Frenchman displayed an array of ornate clocks that caught her eye; one in particular was so stunning that she envisioned it gracing the front watchtower of her Sivaganga palace.

Stalls draped under makeshift tents overflowed with spices—an aromatic tapestry that included rare saffron. She selected turmeric, vermillion, and saffron for their auspicious significance. Meanwhile, Kuyili and her bodyguards indulged in various sweets from other vendors, savoring each bite as they relished their flavors. The rainy season had long since ended, yet occasional showers continued to fall, rarely interrupting the rhythm of daily life.

◆

Hyder positioned himself on the eastern side of the oblong chamber, his gaze sweeping over the verandah. From this vantage

point, he watched his army parading past the exercise grounds, their synchronized steps harmonizing with the lively beats of the French instructors' bands.

"What's the situation at Virupatchi? How is it in the southeast?"

"Virupatchi is calm at the moment. However, the neighboring border regions remain unstable; the Arcot soldiers and the British move freely as they wish, Your Majesty. We had an attack on our way here." After a brief pause, Gopal continued, "The Arcot and the English have taken control of Thanjavur. Their influence extends further south to Tirunelveli."

As the local chieftain, keenly aware of the events unfolding in his region, Gopal had been summoned for a confidential meeting with the Sultan.

"So, Arcot's control extends from Madras all the way to Tirunelveli?"

"Yes, my lord—at least for now."

"Will helping Sivaganga do us any good?"

"Your Majesty, we lack a solid southeastern base and coastal access for arms import currently; Pondicherry and Mahe are lost to the British. To effectively counter British advances at Tirunelveli and reach into greater Marava—specifically Ramanathapuram on the coast—Sivaganga holds a pivotal position. If we can expel British forces from Ramanathapuram, as allies of Sivaganga, it will grant you coastal rights—a significant advantage for us," Gopal stated.

Hyder raised an eyebrow. "What are our risks?"

"We would only face English soldiers once we leave our secure frontiers at Dindigul—at worst. At best, it would be just Arcot soldiers along with any English presence where they've established garrisons," Gopal explained.

"Where are those garrisons located?"

"In Kalaiyarkoil, Tirupattur fort, and Sivaganga palace, Your Majesty."

"How many men will we require?"

"If both Arcot and English forces converge on us, we'd need a substantial infantry; however, if they act separately—which is more likely—we wouldn't need as many troops. The English in Trichy are more concerned with supply lines than launching an offensive attack. Even though Arcot's garrisons at Madurai are sparse and may not seek English support promptly—they might arrive late—and by then we could have dealt with them individually."

"Spies report that the English have stockpiled considerable ammunition within the Sivaganga palace."

"That indicates they may plan an assault on our vulnerable Dindigul province—yet another reason why this expedition must be executed swiftly before they can attack us," Gopal urged.

"And what of the Sivaganga queen? Can she be trusted?"

"I've been with her the past two years. She appears genuine based on my observations; her struggles seem sincere," he replied.

Hyder fell silent momentarily before asking again: "Isn't she also a warrior?"

"She has received training but lacks experience in actual warfare. But, she is preparing a battalion of women soldiers."

Hyder chuckled softly at this revelation: "An army of women? How desperate!" After a brief pause he continued thoughtfully: "So she truly requires our assistance then?"

"I believe so, Your Majesty."

"And we trust she will honor her word and express gratitude for our aid by allying against both Arcot and the English?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Gopal affirmed.

"She has endured considerable suffering yet persevered herself for her daughter—a feat not easily accomplished amidst such adversity and betrayal. Her resilience commands respect; only someone genuinely steadfast could maintain such resolve."

"Indeed so, Your Majesty" agreed Gopal.

Silence settled between them until Hyder finally broke it: "How many men shall we set aside for the queen of Sivaganga?"

"Chief Minister Thandavaraya Pillai had sent letters requesting five thousand infantry and five thousand cavalry," said Gopal.

The hour was growing late for court that day. After a brief pause, Hyder spoke in a gentle yet authoritative voice, "Gopal, ten thousand soldiers may be more than we can spare for her war. We will require them for our own needs. Instead, we will offer her five thousand soldiers, five hundred guns, fifty cannon carts, and one thousand cavalry. We will support Rani Velu in her efforts to reclaim her kingdom at Sivagangai; she could become a valuable ally."

"Yes, my lord," Gopal replied.

"But, at this moment, we cannot afford to allocate resources. However, let us keep her in consideration and start designating regiments and ammunition whenever we are not engaged in battle. Even if the figures are less than what I just mentioned, we will ensure she receives the supplies."

"Yes, my lord," Gopal replied.

◆

An usher arrived at her quarters with news: the Sultan had granted her a private audience in his discussion room the next day. Rani Velu sensed that he was about to reveal his final decision regarding their fate. Though a flicker of worry crossed her mind, she remained optimistic and reassured her diplomats of this impending momentous change—a decision that could reshape her life entirely.

A courtier led Rani Velu into the Sultan's discussion chamber for their first private meeting. Hyder Ali sat upright in a European-style chair, clad in his signature white robe that made him appear like an ordinary soldier—thin yet dignified with sunken cheeks and bright eyes full of respect for the queen before him. A single brooch adorned his robe, securing his turban, and a feather from a white pigeon perched atop it.

Awestruck by his presence, Rani Velu felt as if she were standing before a majestic tiger poised regally in its domain. Taking a steadying breath, she bowed deeply.

"Welcome, my sister," Sultan Hyder greeted warmly.

"I am profoundly grateful for this audience you have granted me," she replied while bowing once more.

"I trust your stay here is comfortable," he began kindly.

"Indeed it is, my lord. I am treated exceptionally well; everything here is both exquisite and fascinating," she responded earnestly.

"Good to hear." There was a brief pause before he continued. "My dear sister, I have resolved to offer you my full support in reclaiming your kingdom. You have endured suffering I would not wish upon any sister of mine. Supporting you will be an honorable act; only when I restore you to your throne will Allah bless me."

Overwhelmed with emotion and unable to find words as tears welled up in her eyes, Rani Velu bowed again deeply. After gathering herself with great effort amidst choking sobs, she managed to say: "I cannot express my gratitude enough for this assistance you are providing me. In return, I pledge my unwavering loyalty to you. We will stand by every decision you make."

"You will receive five thousand soldiers, weapons, ammunition, and one thousand cavalry," he declared with conviction. "Furthermore, we will cover your expenses and those of your army for the duration of your stay at Virupatchi and until your kingdom is restored." He added, "I intend to dispatch my army to Virupatchi soon, but I cannot guarantee when that will be."

Tears streamed down Rani Velu's cheeks as she silently thanked Goddess Raja Rajeswari while expressing heartfelt appreciation towards the Sultan verbally as well; he acknowledged her gratitude with a nod of understanding before signaling for an attendant who escorted her back to her quarters.

■

# *Virupatchi, 1774*

As dawn broke, Appa, Vathiyar, and the others awaited the arrival of Rani Velu, Gopal, Kuyili, and the brothers. An unspoken rule dictated that no one from Virupatchi could enter the mansion where the rani resided without Gopal's permission. Numerous Sivaganga women had gathered, responding to messages dispatched by Appa through secret palm-leaf scripts. Their expressions revealed a fierce resolve to meet Velu Nachiyar, to converse with her, and to stand by her side if she would allow it. Velu Nachiyar returned from Dindigul, her swords glinting in the morning light, embodying the regal presence of a warrior heading into battle. A few among the crowd blinked back tears as they caught sight of her.

As waves of women flooded the mansion, Gopal relocated the Maruthu brothers to the nearby Piranmalai fort and arranged for Appa to stay at a farmhouse in the nearby village of Pakkudi. It had been more than two years since they lost Sivaganga. Sitting on the ornate teakwood swing in the hall of the farmhouse, Appa felt his worries weigh heavily on him. Was it his age? Did the fear lurk in his mind that his life might end before they could reclaim Sivaganga?

Anxiety gnawed at him relentlessly, deteriorating his health day by day. Aware of his declining condition, Rani Velu made multiple trips to Pakkudi, seeking out the minister to discuss his care. She summoned doctors, instructing them to remain by his side, ready to assist and provide support. One fateful night, Appa drifted into

a deep sleep and never woke up. On receiving the heartbreaking news, Rani Velu rushed to his side, her heart plummeting into a chasm of despair. The loss of Thandavarayar Pillai, who had been her mentor, guide, and father figure, left Rani Velu feeling utterly desolate—again.

◆

The Sivaganga evening seemed to stretch infinitely.

Its streets buzzed with life as the resonant beats of the *thandora* drum echoed through the air. "All must heed this call... all who have heard this proclamation must gather at the palace. Those who don't will be deemed traitors to the Nawab and shall face consequences. This is the decree of the Nawab." What was the announcement? Confusion rippled among the crowd, yet their feet moved in unison towards the palace grounds.

Mallari Rayan and his brother sat majestically on the throne, their presence commanding respect. The crowd exchanged wary glances, a palpable tension hanging in the air. Breaking the stillness, Mallari Rayan proclaimed, "From this moment onward, this land shall be called Hussian Nagar."

A hush fell over the assembly as many stood in bewilderment, wrestling with the implications of his words. Where was the Nawab? Why was Mallari Rayan the one to preside over this gathering and issue commands in his stead? Had he been given a role within the Nawab's administration?

Yet, the people remained silent, their uncertainty lingering in the atmosphere.

◆

Shouts from the mansion jolted her awake. It took a moment for the rani to shake off the fog in her mind and realize that the commotion was real, not just a figment of her dreams. Kuyili stood guard as the rani pulled herself up from her bed. Startled, she stumbled into the darkness, gasping when her hands brushed against a hairy leg nearby. Disoriented and unsure of what was

happening or what time it was, she stammered nervously, "What happened?"

Her loyal attendants loomed over her, gripping a man tightly. Gopal and Kuyili had pinned down an unfamiliar figure. In the dim light, his features were obscured, but it was clear he posed a threat. He pleaded for mercy, yet Kuyili showed no signs of compassion. The rani gestured for Gopal and his wife to step closer; they quickly briefed her on their captive. "Your Majesty, he came with a sickle to slit your throat. Kuyili caught him just in time."

"Light the torch first. Bring him before me," commanded the rani.

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty," he cried out desperately.

"Hold the torch close to his face," she instructed as she scrutinized his features.

"Who sent you?" she demanded.

"Nobody, Your Majesty! The villagers who saw you by the pond yesterday told me you were here. I wanted the reward that the prince offered for your head," he sobbed between gasps.

The rani turned to Gopal and signaled him in the half-light; with grim efficiency, he severed the stranger's head. She then faced Kuyili and tore a strip from her saree, wrapping it tightly around her fingers to stop blood flow. As she tied off the cloth, Kuyili regarded her with daughterly affection—a sentiment mirrored in the rani's gaze.

"How long will you keep saving your old mother, my dear daughter?" asked the rani lovingly.

"As long as I live, my queen," replied Kuyili softly but firmly.

"You are my first daughter; do you know that?" The rani gently stroked Kuyili's hair as she rested her head on the rani's lap. Neither spoke. Neither needed to. Words were unnecessary; their bond spoke volumes through shared silence as fingers glided through neat black curls.

From across the mansion came Vadhyar at full speed. He dropped to one knee before saying breathlessly, "My queen, are you alright? I just heard what happened."

"Please don't kneel before me; you are my *guru*," replied the rani reassuringly. "I'm fine."

As Gopal's wife carefully cleaned and bandaged his wounds, the rani addressed him with a firm tone, "We will be leaving your mansion."

"Please, Your Majesty, this is your home. Let us protect you," he implored, desperation lacing his voice.

"No, Gopal. Those who attacked me have discovered my whereabouts; they will strike again and again."

"But, Your Majesty, Hyder will send troops, and we can start the war," Gopal countered, determination flaring in his eyes.

"It has been several months since we last heard from him," she replied, her expression resolute.

"Here, training is underway, Your Majesty; we cannot simply abandon it," he insisted once more, urgency creeping into his tone.

"You continue with the training. I will return often to check on the progress," the rani assured him, her voice steady despite the gravity of their situation.

"My queen, may I have leave to attend to my daughter back home?" Vadhyar requested earnestly.

"Of course, Vadhyar," she responded kindly. "How long will you be gone?"

"A few months at least; I need to manage this harvest and plant another batch of paddy afterward before returning home—hopefully in time for my daughter's wedding too."

"How wonderful! My heartfelt wishes for your daughter's marriage, Vadhyar. You have my permission to leave."

Vadhyar took a deep bow, flung a sack of clothes over his shoulder, grasped his wooden stick, and ventured into the murky

darkness. Kuyili's eyes remained fixed on him, unwavering until he disappeared from view. The night was shrouded in cold and shadows.

■

# *Sivaganga Border Forests, 1774*

They left from Virupatchi to camp at the desolate Padamathur fort: the rani, Kuyili, the brothers, the bodyguards, and trainees. The journey stretched over an entire day, made sluggish by the slow pace of bullock carts and the intermittent walking and trotting of horses among their group of about thirty, including Kuyili and the brothers.

Gopal had implored the rani to stay, but she insisted that she did not want to impose on him and the villagers, fearing that her presence would invite constant threats to her life. With a heavy heart, Gopal consented, promising that provisions would be regularly dispatched to support them. Many capable trainees were selected to accompany them while the others trained at Gopal's mansion.

By late evening, they reached Padamathur fort, which now resembled nothing more than a collection of jagged remnants—walls crumbled and roofs torn apart in places—far removed from what the rani once knew so well. With a heavy sigh at its desolation, she stepped inside and surveyed her surroundings. Exhaustion weighed heavily on everyone; they gathered wood to ignite a fire and prepared gruel for sustenance. Aside from the rani's chamber, not a single room had been cleared or swept clean since its fall into ruin. That night, they slept beneath a blanket of stars against the biting cold.

Before dawn broke, several men stealthily entered the fort's periphery. Chinna and Periya were washing themselves at a pond behind it when a trainee called out for help with urgency ringing

in his voice. The brothers dashed back towards the fort after hastily grabbing whatever clothing lay within reach. Clashes erupted as swords clanged against each other; trainees engaged fiercely with intruders. "Don't kill them!" Chinna shouted above the chaos. "We want them alive."

The assailants were quickly subdued, bound tightly before being interrogated relentlessly—but none uttered even a whisper despite enduring various forms of torment.

Hours melted away without any sign of cooperation from their captives until finally—the rani resolved that death was their fate instead. Once cremated under starlit skies, plans were set in motion to leave that very night.

Confusion rippled through their ranks following such an abrupt encounter: who were these attackers? How had they tracked them down? It seemed clear this wasn't motivated by reward; these were assassins sent forth with purpose. Realizing this truth settled heavily upon her shoulders as she declared firmly to her assembled followers: "We must assume our enemies dispatched them." Nods echoed among her people as they gathered before their queen seeking guidance on their next course of action.

"Let us all pack up. I know you are tired, but we will still have to leave."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the trainees replied in unison.

"Azhagar Kovil forest is hardly a night's journey. We will reach it by daybreak and set up camp there," the rani declared.

Once she was alone with Kuyili and the brothers, her thoughts spilled out loud. "How did they know exactly where I was? Are they tracking me? Is someone among us feeding them information about my whereabouts?"

"Should we keep an eye on the trainees?" one of the brothers suggested.

"I don't think so. I doubt it's a trainee. When would they have time to inform anyone?" The rani countered. "Besides, we only

mentioned Padamathur fort at Gopal's mansion just before leaving. He also told us to keep Azhagar Kovil forest as a secret backup that no one should know about," she added with a heavy sigh.

"Should I go into the nearby village and look for informants?" Chinna offered.

"We'll still keep an eye on the trainees," Kuyili insisted.

"Now that everyone knows we're heading to Azhagar Kovil forest, let's leave this place first. Once we arrive, we can set up camp immediately, and then you can check for informants in the villages," said the rani.

That night, cloaked in darkness, the rani and her entourage hurried towards Azhagar Kovil forest, where ancient ruins awaited them amidst thick, dark forests.

Two years ago, the enemy army had laid waste to Padamathur Fort, as reported by Chinna's informants; it was no longer under anyone's control. Yet curiosity lingered among villagers as they moved from one hamlet to another seeking refuge in nearby woods for the night. Though the rainy season had ended, an icy chill enveloped the group. Stacks of logs cut from trees stood ready for firewood but now lay cold and extinguished; only wisps of smoke hinted at warmth long gone. The rani surmised that midnight had passed—an hour when farmers typically rose early for their fields—and temple doors would soon creak open around what would later be known as 4 a.m. by Western clocks.

"Climb carefully; these sharp stones and uneven paths will prick your feet," Periya warned as he removed his turban. Atop a small hill stood a temple in ruins. "Which portion is the best here?"

The rani dismounted along with Kuyili and the brothers. A chill bit at their lips while mud clung to their clothes from their journey. The trainees swiftly unloaded their sacks; one handed a water pitcher to the rani, who accepted it gratefully. Pots of water were distributed among Kuyili and the brothers too; they gulped down mouthfuls before letting out loud belches. Splashing water on their

faces and wiping themselves with their stoles, they scoffed at Kuyili when she pointed out, "That water is only for drinking." A playful scorn flickered across their faces as Kuyili teased them before they abruptly set off in search of a rivulet.

For much of that day, Rani Velu sat against a broken wall on an uneven but cleared floor while Kuyili lay beside her asleep with her hands cradling her head. In an adjacent portion, after enjoying refreshing baths and bowls of freshly made gruel prepared by a trainee who had grilled river fish at their request, the brothers closed their eyes despite needing one to stay vigilant. In another quarter ahead, several trainees feasted on gruel and grilled fish served on hard sal and teak leaves fashioned into cups. The afternoon warmth enveloped them like a comforting blanket as their dwindling conversations faded into deep snores; one by one they succumbed to sleep after their tiring journey—though not long in distance, it had been exhausting due to hurrying from Padamathur under cover of night.

The darkness settled swiftly in the misty winters of the land, and the owls began their hooting earlier than usual. Chills crept in, accompanied by the distant howls of stray dogs echoing through the night. Above, the sky was a tapestry of stars, with patches of clouds drifting by, obscuring and revealing them in turn.

The full moon cast its gentle glow, lulling most into a deep sleep. Yet one soul remained wide awake—Rani Velu. This awareness gnawed at her unease. As her thoughts spiraled from worries to fears, she retrieved a small idol of the Goddess Raja Rajeswari from beneath her garments tucked inside a wooden chest and offered a silent prayer. After placing it back carefully in its resting spot, she pondered how her enemies always seemed to track her down. Was there a traitor among her camp? Or perhaps some fortunate villager had stumbled upon information that led them to her? The questions swirled in her mind like leaves caught in an autumn breeze as she considered where their informants might be hiding and when they would make their next move. She grappled with

the daunting thought that if this constant flight from one shelter to another continued, raising an army to reclaim her kingdom would be nearly impossible. Several times, she thought she heard the crunch of dried leaves underfoot and sat up alertly to scan the shadows for movement. But silence enveloped her; no cries pierced the stillness. Eventually, fatigue tugged at her eyelids, prompting her to lie down briefly before propping herself against the crumbling wall once more, resigned to wait in watchful anticipation.

◆

Days transitioned into weeks, then months, and eventually years; the harvest festival of *Pongal* had come and gone. For a rare moment, the group felt at ease. Villagers from the settlement down the hill offered their assistance generously, delivering sacks brimming with grains, pulses, jaggery, chickens, and goats without asking for payment or favors in return. Laughter began to flicker back to their faces, fueled by the hope that if no enemies had attacked during the first few months of their encampment, they might be safe for a considerable time to come.

Meanwhile, the rani dispatched messengers and scouts towards Virupatchi to inquire about her army's training progress. Although Gopal responded with reassuring news, unease gnawed at the rani's heart. What if she perished before reclaiming her kingdom? What if her existence became merely an endless cycle of exile and hiding? Why did no one grasp the urgency of her plight? She was aware that Gopal was also sending out messengers to provincial leaders, feudal lords, and minor kingdoms in hopes of forming alliances. Regularly, she sent discreet inquiries about her daughter's health to a hidden location known only to Kuyili. Each day she prayed fervently to their family deity for her daughter's well-being. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she pondered whether this state of waiting would stretch on indefinitely. Four long years had passed.

Am I making a mistake by staying hidden? She often questioned herself. 'But if I sought refuge in Gopal's mansion again, it would surely become a target once more. With four years passing without

significant attacks against me, perhaps it was time to return there and start building my army again,' she considered. Summoning the brothers for counsel, she asked earnestly, "What should we do now? Shall we begin recruiting and training them here?"

"My queen," one brother replied cautiously, "we lack sufficient weapons and security."

"There hasn't been an attack in four years; it seems peaceful enough," she retorted with skepticism.

"Perhaps so," another brother interjected gently. "But we have no resources here; we are merely surviving while hoping for continued safety."

"But what comes next? We need action; don't we?" The rani's frustration bubbled over.

"Why not return to Gopal's mansion and resume where we left off?" suggested one of the brothers.

The rani promptly sent messengers bearing this proposal and Gopal responded positively. But later, her instincts advised her to wait—just wait... wait... wait. Tamil folk songs say that patience is a jewel that women have to adorn with pride—a lesson even queens must heed.

◆

Spring unfurled its vibrant colors, coaxing green tendrils from the crevices of rocks on the hill. The lively chatter of trainees mingled with the melody of birdsong, creating a symphony of youthful energy. "A rider approaches," Kuyili announced, abruptly halting the laughter and pointing decisively towards the north. A solitary horseman surged up the incline, his steed thundering against the earth. The trainees dashed into their fortifications, emerging clad in armor and wielding swords.

"Hold!" Periya commanded firmly. "It's just Vadhyar. You can all return."

The horseman urged his mount forward, dismounted swiftly, and bowed deeply to the rani as he pulled on the reins to steady his horse. He followed her into the fort with an air of urgency.

"My queen," he began breathlessly, "I trust you are well. I returned to Padamathur nearly a month ago only to discover you were not there. It took me considerable time to track your whereabouts; I had to follow winding trails and consult villagers who sent me in various directions. But at last, I am relieved to have found you." His voice trembled slightly from exhaustion and relief.

"Excellent news, Vadhyar," replied the rani, her expression brightening with pride. "Your lengthy search reassures me that our enemies remain oblivious to our location."

"Indeed, indeed," Vadhyar responded eagerly.

"What tidings do you bring? Why were you absent for so long? You mentioned returning within a few months," she pressed, her brow furrowing with concern.

"I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," he said apologetically. "Finding a suitable groom for my daughter proved more challenging than anticipated; however, her marriage was celebrated splendidly in the end. Your generous gift of gold was invaluable during this time—my heartfelt gratitude goes out to you. Now that my household responsibilities are fulfilled, I am entirely at your service."

"Good," she replied warmly. "I'm pleased you can now dedicate yourself fully to us. What's happening in the kingdom?" Her eagerness was palpable.

"My queen," Vadhyar continued gravely, "The prince sought to rename Sivaganga, insisting that everyone call it Hussain Nagar."

"What?" The rani's surprise echoed in her voice.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"But our people don't refer to it that way. They simply remain silent."

The rani inhaled deeply, her heart swelling with gratitude for her people, and pledged to overthrow the British and reclaim her kingdom. The love she felt for her subjects was as fierce and protective as a mother's for her child. With each passing moment, her determination solidified into an unwavering resolve. She began to trust that her decision was just. Her faith deepened like roots anchoring a mighty tree. "My *guru*, I owe you thanks for the encouraging news that bolsters my resolve even further. Please eat something and take some rest," she said.

"My queen, how long will we remain here?" Vadhyar inquired, his brow furrowed with concern.

"I cannot provide a timeline; our scouts have yet to report on enemy camps or their plans," she replied.

"If I may speak freely, my queen?"

"Of course, Vadhyar."

"I have information from last month when I tracked the English forces. They seem to have lost interest in you, Your Majesty. Their infantry and cavalry are now marching towards Tiruchirapalli cantonment. Even small battalions have been ordered there."

"That is indeed reassuring news. However, Vadhyar, every time we faced an attack—especially after the man seeking the bounty on my head struck at Gopal Nayakar's mansion in Virupatchi—it was not the Englishmen behind it. It was assassins or other bounty hunters at work. So while they may be gathering at Tiruchirapalli, they could very well be employing hired killers. Even the Arcot prince could be hiring one. Still, I find comfort in knowing that the English have shifted their focus away from me."

"Where is our little princess Vellachi now, my queen?" he asked gently.

"She is hidden away in a cave on a distant hill; even I do not know her exact location," the rani replied with a heavy sigh.

"I understand, my queen. It pains me to see you separated from your daughter. I can only hope she is safe."

"Thank you for your concern, Vadhyar."

"May I take my leave now, my queen?" he requested softly.

With a slight nod of her head, the rani dismissed him.

A fortnight passed without incident. Each morning, Vadhyar rose early to train the village boys and girls in *silambam*, lend a hand with daily chores, enjoy hearty meals, and then drift off into slumber. Occasionally, he would stroll down to the village below and return with villagers who carried pots brimming with spicy delicacies prepared for festivals and offerings to the gods. "You seem troubled, my queen," he remarked one day. "There's no need for concern."

"Is my situation so blissful that I can afford to relax?" the queen retorted sharply.

"Not at all, my queen. I just thought perhaps you could ease your worries a bit," Vadhyar replied gently. That evening, as the trainees engaged in a lively game of hide and seek, Vadhyar reclined on a sun-warmed rock, watching them with a smile. The rani emerged from her quarters and settled onto another rock nearby; her devoted attendants gathered around her, sitting on scattered stones in companionship. "How delightful it is to see children playing," mused the rani. A sense of warmth and security enveloped everyone present. Eventually, fatigue overcame them; they dozed off without bothering to eat dinner since the lunch brought by Vadhyar had been so filling.

Suddenly, a gentle shake on the rani's shoulder roused her from her slumber. "My queen, please go inside! A gang is approaching," Kuyili whispered urgently in her ear. She blinked awake and turned towards the kneeling figure before her; the brothers stood nearby as well, their expressions pleading for urgency. "Hurry, my queen!" they urged together. Surveying her surroundings, she noticed Vadhyar snoring peacefully in the distance as dawn began to break—a few streaks of gray light appeared on the horizon.

With Kuyili ensuring her safety within the fort's walls, the brothers charged forward to confront their attackers. The gang was formidable; however, Periya's immense strength allowed him to seize them one by one and hurl them off the hilltop with ease. Those who managed to evade him were met by Chinna's swift blade as he dispatched them mercilessly. Hearing the commotion stirred some trainees from their sleep; they quickly joined forces with the brothers.

Vadhyar awoke abruptly and grabbed his stick just as all remaining assassins were vanquished. The brothers hurried back into the fort to alert the rani once more about their precarious situation. "There were at least a dozen men attacking us from both sides," they informed her breathlessly. "More may be on their way soon—we must leave immediately!"

"At this rate, how will we raise an army and mount an attack?" the queen mused, her brow furrowed in thought. After a brief silence, she commanded, "Alright, gather everyone. Tell them to eat whatever they can find. Secure the grocery sacks and wooden chests. In the next three *nazhigais*, we leave."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the brothers replied in unison. "Could you inform us of our destination, Your Majesty?"

"Dindigul forests. We would be safe there; it is under Hyder Ali's dominion; the forests pose a threat to both the Nawab and the English," the rani explained.

Kuyili and the brothers exchanged relieved glances. "It's a wise decision, my queen. Though these crumbling forts have rooms, they are still on hills, and we cannot hide forever. Eventually, we will be exposed. What puzzles me is how we felt secure here for years before this sudden attack," Kuyili remarked thoughtfully. The brothers nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps it simply took them time for the enemies to track us down," suggested the rani. "Let's analyze everything later; for now, we must pack up and head for the forests." She asserted.

Two days later, the rani and her entourage entered the Dindigul forests, venturing deeper than before. A light spring drizzle soaked into the earth, transforming the already cool ground into a wet and slippery terrain. Yet despite this dampness, the trainees' spirits remained high as they set up camp—pitching tents with practiced ease, drawing water from a distant pond, cooking gruel over open flames, and gathering firewood with laughter echoing through the trees. For now, they felt safe and at ease.

The recent attacks gnawed at Vadhyar's nerves like a knife scraping splinters from his *silambam* stick. He hadn't been present during their first encounter with assassins but had been shaken by their second assault. Kuyili noticed his sudden withdrawal and settled beside him on a hollow log while slurping hot gruel and savoring sarsaparilla root pickle with her fingers. "Why aren't you joining everyone for breakfast? You've been brooding since the Azhagar Kovil forest attack," she prodded gently while peering into his eyes with a teasing smile that he found unwelcome.

He remained silent in response to her inquiry; her playful grin faltered into disappointment as she huffed away in frustration.

For a long time afterwards, Kuyili watched Vadhyar, who was reclusive. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, its rays grew more intense, prompting him to rise abruptly and stride into the forest's embrace. By noon, he returned to camp, arms laden with an abundance of food and supplies: glistening jaggery, crunchy cashew nuts, hearty pulses, livestock ready for market, aromatic cinnamon and other spices, as well as offerings from village temples like steaming *pongal*, creamy curd rice, sweet *laddus*, and soft *adirasams*. The air buzzed with excitement; even the rani's eyes sparkled with delight. The trainees rushed towards him affectionately, eager to lift the heavy sacks from his shoulders.

After indulging in a lavish lunch that left everyone satisfied and relaxed, they settled down for a siesta. A hush fell over the camp as drowsiness enveloped them. Soon after, Kuyili detected a faint sound—the rustle of leaves breaking the stillness. Sensing

something amiss, she rose and scanned her surroundings but found no one in sight. Just then, she caught a glimpse of someone slipping around a bush onto a narrow mud trail before vanishing into the underbrush. Quietly determined to investigate further, she padded along barefoot down the path.

With each careful step taken over several minutes, she soon spotted Vadhyar glancing back nervously before darting into nearby foliage without making a sound; he too was barefoot. She concealed herself behind trees while keeping him in her line of sight as he walked for nearly three *nazhigais* before reaching a forest village that emerged on the horizon. He slipped into a hut only to reappear moments later and retrace his steps back into the woods.

Curiosity piqued, Kuyili entered the hut where she confronted a man who had just rolled up a small piece of parchment and tucked it into his waistband. He struck at her instinctively; however, she retaliated fiercely enough that he stumbled backward and fell to the ground.

Overcome by surprise and fear, he handed her the parchment without protest. It revealed urgent details:

*This is Vetrivel Vadhyar writing to Mallari Rayan. They seem aware of the link between us. They've concluded that I am the channel for numerous secret messages intended for the Pudukkottai king and the Arcot Nawab. Therefore, please refrain from reaching out to me for some time.*

Mallari Rayan served as a puppet leader, and through his unwavering loyalty to both the Nawab's son and the English alliance, he governed Madurai in 1779 and, for a time, Sivaganga.

Kuyili interrogated him until he confessed that he had been promised payment for delivering this information before she gagged him and bound his wrists with thick jute ropes. Shoving him aside into deeper woods for concealment, she brought him to where her brothers were camping and secured him there before turning their attention back to Vadhyar.

Before he could make an escape attempt of his own design or plead innocence again, they swiftly subdued him and restrained his movements tightly with ropes. "So it was you all along who betrayed us by revealing the rani's whereabouts," sneered one brother while another echoed their disdainful assessment: "You traitor!"

"Please! You've got it all wrong," Vadhyar protested desperately. "This man may have received that parchment from someone else—I merely entered his hut briefly."

"For what purpose?" Kuyili demanded sharply.

"I was misled! I wanted to meet my friend but ended up in the wrong place—now I'm being punished unjustly!" he cried out.

The brothers exchanged wary glances before turning their attention back to Kuyili amidst an electric silence filled with tension. The other man had sworn Vadhyar was responsible for delivering that crucial parchment.

In hushed tones away from prying ears of their captive audience—who remained tied nearby—they deliberated quietly among themselves. "What if he isn't truly guilty?" one brother ventured cautiously. "Remember how Vadhyar insisted we take only that specific route leading us straight towards Virupatchi? If Appa hadn't guided us safely through those treacherous paths back then…." Kuyili interjected breathlessly as memories flooded back about how they barely escaped disaster upon reaching Virupatchi itself when Vadhyar wore an anxious expression throughout their journey together.

"And think about it: Why did we suddenly face an attack after enjoying four peaceful years at Azhagar Kovil?"

The brothers nodded slowly now convinced by her reasoning—but Periya posed another question: Should we inform the rani?

"No," Kuyili replied firmly, shaking her head resolutely against any suggestion otherwise. "Vadhyar would twist everything against us trying gain sympathy from her vulnerable state right now—she's

not thinking clearly enough! Besides… she still reveres him as her *guru*."

"Then let's execute him ourselves," came their chorus agreement full of resolve mixed with anger directed towards betrayal lingering heavily between them all.

Moments later, when the rani stepped inside their tent discovering splatters staining canvas flaps around them—Kuyili launched straight into an explanation while watching worry morph across the rani's once curious features now transformed into deep sorrowful pain etched visibly on every line drawn across her face like shadows cast upon light itself.

"How could my trusted *guru* wish me harm? What have I ever withheld from him?" Closing her eyes, lowering her head momentarily weighed down by disbelief until finally releasing pent-up breath forcefully followed by tightening brows furrowing together again—she continued speaking bitterly, "Six entire years wasted thanks entirely due this man's treachery! Hadn't it been for his presence among us... we might've mounted at least one successful attack against the prince already instead of languishing here fruitlessly."

In stark contrast to Kuyili's expectations, the rani was devoid of pity or confusion. Her resolve to reclaim her kingdom burned fiercely within her. The weight of emotions—guilt over her husband's death, sorrow for his absence, and the ache of losing the throne—had evaporated, leaving only determination in their wake. Kuyili felt a surge of satisfaction at this transformation. Had she been aware of Vadhyar's treachery, the rani would have annihilated him without hesitation; Kuyili acknowledged this with a sense of pride. Yet beneath that satisfaction lay a flicker of delight in having acted decisively as the rani might have done herself. They executed the villager swiftly and conducted his cremation deep within the forest's shadows.

"So, are we finished darting from one hideout to another, Your Majesty?" Kuyili inquired.

"We must linger here in these woods for a time to determine whether Vadhyar was indeed our last spy," replied the rani firmly. "Once we are confident that we can remain undetected for an extended period, we will make our way to the Virupatchi outskirts." The brothers nodded in agreement. After a month, the rani and her entourage relocated to set up camp within the protective embrace of the Virupatchi outskirts.

Though it had been a gamble to venture to the Padamathur fort, which bordered on her Sivaganga kingdom, Rani Velu believed the fort would escape the notice of her enemies. As it turned out, her instincts were correct—until the treachery of Vadhyar came into play.

The attempt to kill the rani in Virupatchi had been orchestrated by a bounty hunter, a foe she would rather confront any day. Moreover, that region fell under Hyder Ali's dominion, making a direct attack from her enemies unlikely.

On the outskirts of Virupatchi, Rani Velu immersed herself in toiling tirelessly, rising at dawn as the first rays of sunlight pierced the horizon. She made her way to Gopal's sprawling mansion, where her soldiers trained with fervor. There, she imparted her extensive knowledge of the *valari* weapon, a finely crafted tool of their rebellion, to the women who were eager to learn and fight. In the shadows, she discreetly dispatched messages to her loyal subjects in Sivaganga, each note carefully penned to maintain secrecy and urgency.

Her days were filled with passionate lectures delivered to the Sivaganga villagers who shared her vision of reclaiming their lost kingdom. She meticulously analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the trainees, mapping out strategies that would give them an advantage in the looming conflict. To sustain her soldiers, she amassed a stockpile of food grains, ensuring that they would not go hungry as they prepared for battle.

To uplift her troops' spirits, she delivered rousing speeches that echoed through the training grounds, her voice a beacon of hope

that warded off the creeping weariness that threatened to settle among them. She regularly reminded Hyder Ali of his duty to provide troops, crafting letters with precision and care, and sending scouts or soldiers on secretive missions to ensure they reached him undetected.

In the wake of Appa's death, Rani Velu felt the weight of leadership press down upon her, compelling her to take on ministerial responsibilities in addition to her military role. Even on the fringes of Virupatchi, she kept her enemies disoriented by frequently relocating her camp, a tactical maneuver designed to protect herself and her loyal circle. She ensured Vellachi remained safe and concealed, far from the chaos of war.

Meanwhile, she had moved Vellachi to a hidden cave home nestled within the Piranmalai hills, where a *siddha* doctor tended to her weak health. The cave, adorned with natural beauty and shielded from prying eyes, became a sanctuary for Vellachi and her maids, who relished the tranquility of their secret refuge, away from the turmoil that enveloped their world.

Six long years had passed since the rani made her desperate escape from her homeland, leaving behind the familiar sights and sounds of her once-beloved kingdom. Four years had slipped away like sand through her fingers since Hyder Ali, a formidable leader with a reputation for strength, had pledged his unwavering support to her cause. The air was thick with tension, as the townsfolk gathered in small clusters, their gazes fixed on the distant horizon where they hoped to see the banners of Hyder Ali's forces unfurling against the sky. Each day brought a mix of hope and dread, as they clung to the possibility of salvation while fearing the worst.

In Tamil, there's a poignant saying: *Kaikku ettunadu vaikku ettale*—what reached the hands didn't reach the mouth. A reminder of the fragility of fortune. the rani often pondered this wisdom, feeling the weight of its meaning in her heart. She had managed to arrange a meeting with Hyder, a moment that had filled her with both excitement and trepidation. He had looked her in the eyes and

assured her of his steadfast allegiance, but even in that moment of promise, a gnawing doubt began to fester within her. What if she couldn't fully grasp the opportunity laid before her? What if there was an unseen gap between the cup and the lip, a cruel twist of fate that would snatch her hopes away at the last moment? With a heavy heart, she fervently prayed that such a dismal fate would not come to pass, yearning for the strength to hold on to her dreams.

■

# *The Carnatic Situation*

In the 1770s, the twin ports of Pondicherry and Mahe stood as bastions of French power, controlling the southeastern approach to the Indian peninsula. This tactical position posed a significant threat to English interests, particularly those concentrated in Madras and Calcutta along the eastern coast. However, Pondicherry and Mahe maintained an air of superiority, with the French believing themselves insulated from English influence. By this time, the East India Company had amassed a formidable force of sixty-seven thousand troops, deploying them for various political maneuvers. Yet it took over three decades for them to wrest control of Pondicherry from French hands. There were three notable military campaigns against the city: one in 1748, another in 1760, and finally the decisive battle in 1778 when the British emerged victorious. The port was crucial for the French due to its role in importing valuable goods like ammunition and its alliance with Hyder Ali.

In their initial attempt during the war of 1748, British forces faltered. Ignoring local weather patterns, they launched their offensive in autumn only to be thwarted by torrential rains that began in October. Their efforts proved futile as they retreated from a territory vulnerable to cyclones during monsoon season from October through December; firing rifles became pointless amidst downpours. During the 1760s, they launched another raid on the region. The conflict dragged on for several months, ultimately forcing the French to abandon the outpost. In the chaos, British forces inflicted heavy casualties on civilians, even as French commander

Lally made efforts to evacuate as many non-combatants as he could. Nevertheless, Pondicherry stood firm as the capital of French India and continued to be its most significant territory.

Meanwhile, across the ocean in America, hostilities flared anew between British and French forces. This time, their aggression was unusually focused on India, as British colonies received orders to seize French territories there. Equipped with fifteen hundred regular troops and bolstered by nine thousand Indian sepoys, they launched an assault on areas near Pondicherry, where only seven hundred regulars and six hundred sepoys defended the French position. The main gates were heavily fortified; stockades rose like sentinels along the coastlines while artillery positions bristled with cannons aimed at the horizon. Defenses surrounding British outposts crumbled under relentless pressure as reinforcements surged in following their capture of nearby Karaikal. The French attempts to flood northern drains faltered as British engineers skillfully drained them instead. As ammunition ran perilously low for France's defenders, they raised a white flag signaling surrender—similar fates befell Mahe on the Malabar coast.

The shifting tides also impacted Hyder Ali's ambitions in Mysore; though he lacked a royal title, he wielded considerable power there. After being betrayed by British allies during earlier conflicts against Marathas—an affront that fueled his desire for revenge—he forged strong ties with France but found supply lines severed following Mahe's fall. When offered alliances against their common enemy by both Marathas and Nizam of Hyderabad, he eagerly accepted.

Meanwhile, Hyder Ali had launched an invasion of the minor kingdom of Calicut. Although the Nair troops employed their effective guerrilla tactics, leaping from trees to ambush Hyder's soldiers, they were ultimately overpowered and captured. Some accounts detailed horrific instances of torture inflicted on those who refused to convert to Hyder's faith. His ambitions extended further south to Thiruvananthapuram, a kingdom that had yet to decide whether to seek protection from the British.

At the same time, Thanjavur, which was dutifully supplying troops and arms to both the British and the Nawab, found itself stretched thin. Despite repeated urgent pleas for assistance from its erstwhile yet distant Maratha clan, they turned a blind eye, allowing both the Nawab and the British to drain Thanjavur's resources. The Nawab ruthlessly subdued Thanjavur, which had been abandoned by its original Maratha allies while the British stood by, fully aware that the Nawab was in the wrong. Meanwhile, the Pudukkottai kingdom quickly capitulated before any British intervention could occur and proclaimed itself a staunch ally of the East India Company, contributing troops for their efforts in the Carnatic wars.

By the late 1770s, the Carnatic region was engulfed in turmoil, marked by the French withdrawal and the British ascent. The British had seized control of Sivaganga, Thanjavur, and Tirunelveli, with the lands of the Arcot Nawab effectively surrendered to their dominion. Their ambitions stretched further into the south-western territories approaching Thiruvananthapuram, now Travancore. The East India Company reveled in its achievements; nearly all its agents returned to Britain laden with riches, earning them the moniker "new Nabobs," a playful twist on the Nawab title due to English pronunciation. Robert Clive returned to London to showcase his newfound wealth but tragically took his own life a few years later. Others fell ill during their time in India and met similar fates, yet many more made it back to England, acquiring vast estates and ascending to lordship. They even secured seats in the House of Lords. While numerous officials faced allegations of corruption, discontent brewed within the English government regarding how locals were treated by Company representatives in India; however, no significant repercussions awaited those responsible. All transgressions were conveniently overlooked amid the allure of prosperity and triumph. Nobody questioned success—this became their guiding principle.

■

# *Virupatchi, 1778*

A long, rattling noise reverberated against the door, shattering the stillness of a haunting midnight. Vellachi's maids burst into the doctor's room, their hurried footsteps echoing like a frantic heartbeat, jolting him from a restless slumber. Disoriented and bleary-eyed, he barely registered the booming disturbance before the door splintered violently, yielding to a group of burly goons who stormed in like a tempest, their presence darkening the threshold. At the forefront was a pale-skinned man, his striking silver hair catching the faint light and glinting like polished steel, an unsettling halo around him. The maids froze in place, instinctively huddling together, their eyes wide with terror, breaths quickening as they exchanged panicked glances.

"Where is Velu Nachiyar?" one of the goons bellowed, his voice a thunderous growl that sent shivers down their spines, reverberating off the walls like an ominous warning that seemed to curl around them like smoke. "Our rani is not here," stammered the frail old doctor, his long white beard trembling as he spoke, each word a struggle against the fear gripping his heart like an iron vice.

"What rani? Rani of which kingdom? That widow has been hiding for years, and you still dare to call her rani?" the goon sneered, his voice dripping with contempt, a mocking edge that sliced through the air. In a swift motion, he swung a fist, landing a brutal blow to the doctor's face that echoed through the room, sending him crashing to the floor in a heap, unconscious.

The maids quaked in place, their fear thick in the air, a palpable fog of dread that clung to them like a heavy cloak. The goons spread out, their heavy boots thudding against the wooden floors as they scoured each room with ruthless efficiency, searching for the elusive queen.

In one dimly lit chamber, shadows flickered across the walls, where a burly figure spotted a girl nestled under the covers, her chest rising and falling gently in sleep, oblivious to the chaos. He shook her awake roughly, the harshness of his grip jarring her from dreams, his breath hot and demanding as he barked, "Who are you?"

"Vellachi, daughter of Rani Velu," she murmured, still caught in the haze of sleep, her voice soft and unsteady, laced with confusion as she blinked against the darkness.

"Even better," the Englishman behind the goon boomed, his laughter erupting like a sudden storm, filling the room with a chilling echo that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

◆

Before the first light of dawn broke over the horizon, casting a soft glow that kissed the earth awake, the rani stood resolute, her keen eyes scanning the training ground where soldiers engaged in their grueling exercises. The air was thick with the metallic clang of swords colliding and the rhythmic thud of boots striking the dusty ground, punctuating the morning stillness. Suddenly, the tranquility shattered like glass when a maid burst into the clearing, her face a canvas of distress, tears cascading down her cheeks like a sudden summer rainstorm. Her breaths came in frantic gasps, each one laced with urgency and desperation. "They've taken her! A group of thugs, led by an Englishman, has kidnapped your daughter!"

The rani's heart plummeted at the shocking news, her complexion draining of color as disbelief washed over her features like a wave. Kuyili, standing nearby, froze in disbelief, her eyes wide and shimmering with unshed tears as she struggled to comprehend

the gravity of the situation unfolding before them. The brothers, sensing the urgency that hung in the air like a storm cloud, rushed towards the rani, their faces etched with concern and fierce determination. "We are with you, O Rani," they proclaimed in unison, their voices steady and resolute, cutting through the chaos. "Let us search for her. We will bring her back swiftly," they vowed, a fierce loyalty igniting in their hearts, ready to face whatever dangers lay ahead.

With unwavering resolve, the rani sprang into action, her heart pounding with determination as she orchestrated the formation of search parties. Periya Maruthu, a towering figure known for his tactical acumen, would lead one group, commanding fifty seasoned soldiers, each one equipped with gleaming swords and shields that reflected their fierce loyalty. Chinna Maruthu, equally formidable, would take command of another fifty warriors, their faces set in grim determination, ready to face whatever dangers awaited them in the wild. A contingent of fifty women warriors, fierce and unyielding, rallied under Kuyili's leadership, their eyes blazing with a shared purpose, ignited by the call to rescue those who had been taken from them. The remaining soldiers would fall under Rani Velu's astute guidance; her strategic mind was already plotting their course through the treacherous landscape.

As they set off, the sun began to rise, casting a warm golden hue over the rugged Piranmalai hills, illuminating the path ahead. The terrain was a challenging mix of steep inclines and rocky outcrops, dotted with dense forests that cloaked the area in deep shadows, providing both cover and obstacles to navigate. Each step echoed with purpose and urgency as the search parties ventured forth, driven by the weight of their mission and the fervent hope of reclaiming what had been lost. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and pine, mingling with the sound of rustling leaves, each warrior steeling themselves for the trials that lay ahead.

◆

The goons treaded carefully through the villages, their hearts pounding with the fear that if the locals caught sight of them snatching the girl, a furious uprising would erupt against them. Thus, during the sun's ascent, they sought refuge in the tangled underbrush near the looming Piranmalai Hill, where shadows danced between the trees. Rani Velu began her search among the dense foothill forests, her senses heightened as she navigated through the thick foliage. It was there that she stumbled upon an abandoned temple, its once-majestic structure now a mere skeleton, with vines creeping over the remnants and the roof long since caved in. Yet, despite the ravages of time that surrounded it, the stone figure of the deity remained pristine, almost ethereal in its stillness. She approached reverently, bending low to bow before the idol, feeling the weight of history in the air. An iron spear loomed ominously across from the statue, its sharp tip glinting in the dappled sunlight, pointed defiantly towards the heavens.

Suddenly, the rhythmic thunder of hooves shattered the serene atmosphere, jolting her into action. She quickly signaled her soldiers to melt into the shadows, their forms disappearing among the trees. A figure emerged, an Englishman racing forward, fury etched across his face, a small girl gripping tightly to him on his galloping horse. As recognition struck, her heart surged with hope; it was her daughter. With fierce determination, she stepped from her hiding place, resolve hardening her features. The gang thundered away, panic in their eyes as Kuyili, fierce and relentless, pursued them like a hound on a scent. Rani Velu rallied her soldiers, urging them to burst forth from their cover, a wave of warriors ready to reclaim what was theirs.

In that moment of chaos, the Englishman raised his rifle, the barrel aimed directly at her, a look of cold calculation on his face. Without hesitation, Rani Velu drew her *valari*, her movements fluid and precise. In one swift, lethal motion, she hurled the weapon, and it sailed through the air, severing his head cleanly from his shoulders, a grim testament to her skill. As the body slumped lifelessly to the ground, she seized the severed head with grim triumph and drove

it onto the sharp tip of the spear, the metal piercing through flesh and bone. Offering it as a sacrifice to the deity, she felt a surge of righteous fury and purpose, a promise to protect her daughter and her people at any cost.

◆

In the grand hall of the Sivaganga palace, the air crackled with tension as Umdat-al-Umara, Mallari Rayan, and his brother Ranga Rayan convened in an urgent council. Mallari Rayan's voice thundered, each word laced with indignation: "Your Majesty, a woman has slain an Englishman! She beheaded him, displaying his severed head upon the sacred trident as if it were a trophy. This is no ordinary woman; she is a witch, a force to be reckoned with! If she possesses the audacity to take the life of our Englishman, then she too must face the same fate—beheaded, her head displayed for all to see at the entrance arch of our palace. Should we choose to remain silent, the people of Sivaganga will question our very manhood. They will mock us, sneering in our faces. We must act swiftly and announce our decision without delay."

As dusk settled over the bustling streets of Sivaganga, the deep, resonant beat of the *thandora* drum echoed like a heartbeat through the narrow alleys and open squares, summoning the townsfolk to gather. "Rani Velu has slain an English officer beloved by our king," the proclamation boomed, reverberating off the weathered stone walls and reaching every corner of the town. "It is crucial that every subject joins in enforcing her punishment. Those who manage to capture Rani Velu, whether alive or deceased, shall be rewarded with rank and riches beyond their wildest dreams."

At this bold announcement, the people of Sivaganga exchanged knowing glances, their eyes sparkling with mischief. A ripple of laughter bubbled up among them, like a chorus of tiny bells chiming in the evening air, as they reveled in the absurdity of the task laid before them. The weight of the king's decree hung heavy, yet the spirit of rebellion danced in their hearts. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, until a full year slipped by without

a single soul daring to undertake the perilous mission. Instead, tales of Rani Velu's courage spread, growing more fantastical with each retelling, as the townsfolk found solace in their shared defiance against authority.

◆

Seven long years had slipped away since Rani Velu had narrowly escaped the clutches of the enemies. During this time, a fervent desire for freedom ignited among the oppressed populace. Those who detested the ruthless English revenue collectors, burdening the villagers with exorbitant taxes, and those who had come to see the treachery of the Nawabs for what it truly was began to converge upon Rani Velu in ever-growing numbers.

They arrived with flames of passion flickering in their hearts and steely resolve gleaming in their eyes, each one pledging unwavering loyalty to her fearless fight for justice. The forces of the Sivaganga chieftains, gathering strength at Virupatchi, swelled to over a thousand brave souls, their spirits unyielding as they awaited the promised support of Hyder Ali. With sharpened swords and battle cries ready to echo through the valleys, they stood united, eager to rise against the shackles of their oppressors and reclaim their freedom.

■

# *Fort St George, 1779*

Major General Murray McGregor scrutinized the man appointed as Governor of Madras a year prior. Seated across from him at a polished teak table, Sir Thomas Rumbold sat upright, his gaunt frame accentuated by a lantern jaw, an elongated nose, and eager blue eyes that sparkled with insatiable ambition. Whispers of his corruption and scandals had reached Murray's ears while Rumbold was still in England; how Rumbold had clawed his way to the position of director within the company just a few years ago and now held the governorship—only he could truly fathom the depths of such maneuvering.

Murray had risen early that morning, a dull ache throbbing in both his head and stomach from the previous night's extravagant gala. He had arrived in Madras from Thanjavur days before, yet here he was, waiting impatiently as time slipped away. He had an urgent message for the governor, but it seemed to vanish into thin air amid Rumbold's distractions. Just when Murray thought he might find some solace in revelry again, a summons pulled him back into duty at dawn. As he hastily donned his trousers and boots, memories of last night swirled through his thoughts; for a major who indulged too freely even among comrades, it was indeed a precarious game to play.

He lingered for a moment in the corridor outside Rumbold's office, gathering himself against any potential accusations that might arise from his late-night escapades. Ultimately, though, the

pressing nature of his message and allegiance to duty propelled him forward as the usher finally granted him entry.

"Major," Rumbold began without looking up from an array of important documents sprawled before him. "Why have you left your base at Thanjavur to come here? What is so urgent?"

"Sir," Murray replied earnestly, "I needed to deliver an urgent update personally and seek your guidance."

Rumbold lifted his gaze slowly from the files. "What is it?"

"The guerilla queen has killed an Englishman."

"And how urgent is this matter?"

"She is getting bolder, while waiting for Hyder Ali's troops. If she secures his backing, we risk losing control over the Sivaganga garrisons."

"Aren't there other pressing concerns?"

Murray felt stunned by Rumbold's nonchalance; how could this man remain so composed when they stood on the brink of losing ground they had fought so fiercely for? It illustrated starkly the divide between soldiers and bureaucrats—the army bled on battlefields while filling company coffers that employed such arrogant figures as Rumbold. His men endured relentless heat and meager rations; many suffered illness or succumbed entirely—facts well-known yet seemingly disregarded by all but Murray himself. The native soldiers viewed British soldiers as weaklings ripe for exploitation. When recruiting native soldiers, every demand had to be met promptly; still, they banded together to revolt frequently over perceived favoritism towards English soldiers. Each day presented an avalanche of challenges compressed into one singular existence.

And here sat this haughty rogue—rumored to have swindled vast sums—coolly taunting him while oblivious to the stakes at hand.

"If we lose Sivaganga, sir, the locals might grow more audacious."

"So?"

"They could start believing that the English are weak; a victory would embolden them."

"Well, tell me what you've done with the garrison and the town." Rumbold thundered.

"We are defending it with all our strength. The armory in the garrison would be crucial in any potential battle, sir."

"Have you managed to gather taxes from the inhabitants of Sivaganga, the provincial leaders, and local chieftains?"

"We have done our part, sir. The collection records have been sent to your office since the year we took over the kingdom."

"Insignificant!"

"But, sir, that's not our responsibility. Madras should dispatch collectors. All we can do is coerce the villagers into compliance."

"Don't instruct me on my duties, Major." There was a moment of silence.

"Alright. Let's focus on your responsibilities. Why haven't you handled that guerrilla woman in Sivaganga after all these years?"

That pricked at Murray. It was a task he had left unfinished for so many years; it unnerved him that a woman had outsmarted him. Murray shifted restlessly in his chair, his expression darkening. The only success they had was luring that Manickam scout, who was promptly killed. Vadhyar tried his best, but somehow the Sivaganga runaways managed to expose his betrayal and kill him. Now, that woman was encircled by a fiercely loyal group with no openings for an intrusion of any kind.

It felt fundamentally wrong to him, deep in his gut. From the very first moment when the prince approached Smith about attacking the kingdom, Smith had participated out of greed. The prince was a nuisance, and the entire scheme of plotting and attacking the Sivaganga king had become an even greater burden. If they had executed their plan flawlessly without allowing that woman and her child to escape, the inhabitants would have been thoroughly subdued.

Smith, Bonjour and that prince—what a troublesome three! Bonjour had attacked that guerilla woman and got summarily kicked out by dogs. That was yet another blunder; he had cautioned him time and again.

Then, Bonjour had resorted to covert tactics, bribing that avaricious Vadhyar, which also ended poorly. The previous governor should have executed them for playing foul; he would have had every right to do so. Yet, he allowed him to go home with merely a warning. Now, that leniency was proving disastrous.

And now Murray was left to face this arrogant scoundrel who dared to treat him with such disrespect. Everything about this situation felt wrong; everything about it reeked of failure. There was the temptation of gold, which the prince hoarded more for himself while allocating far less to the British—his excuse being that they would eventually strip them of it anyway. For all their toil, what did they truly gain? Smith couldn't even send wealth back home like other governors did; all they possessed were their meager salaries and now a tarnished reputation. He let out a heavy sigh.

"We came close to it several times, sir, but the governor's office redirected our efforts to Thanjavur, the Anglo-Mysore wars, and various smaller battles." It was a half-truth, one that the newly appointed governor could not easily verify as he had only taken charge a year ago.

Rumbold's focus was more on last year's revenues and discrepancies in accounts than on the records of military personnel. The governor's expression softened. "You did conquer the kingdom, but you failed to quell the people's revolts. They remain fiercely loyal to their queen." Murray lowered his gaze.

"What do you think of Hyder's promise to send his troops? Do you think he will do it?" the governor inquired.

"Last year, our chief spy, Vadhyar, got killed. All we know is she had managed to slip into Dindigul for a meeting with Hyder years ago. But we have no information on whether Hyder has made arrangements to send her troops or not."

A silence fell between them. Rain drizzled through the open windows, soaking into the sills. It was monsoon season in Southeast India; Madras faced relentless downpours and storms. Before British intervention, coastal areas had been overlooked by kingdoms and served primarily as fishing grounds; fertile inland regions were where capitals thrived under more temperate climates.

That week in Madras brought a violent storm unlike any other. Yet the determined Englishmen continued their work undeterred by nature's fury—governor included—alongside his clerks, aides, and officials. Scouts and military personnel moved through their duties as if a mere drizzle fell outside. This resilience stemmed partly from their upbringing in Britain, where rain was commonplace; however, it was mainly driven by their unwavering commitment to hard work and discipline.

The rain poured heavily that day under an ominous gray sky. Both Murray and the governor gazed out at the downpour, questioning whether Hyder's troops would ever reach the woman amidst such weather conditions. They recognized that while the monsoon season was nearing its end there, records indicated heavy rains with fierce winds and thunder were still expected. The east and west experienced vastly different climates; when one ceased its rains, another began.

"Deploy additional officers and sentries," commanded the governor decisively. "We must prepare for battle if it comes to that. Strengthen your network of spies; increase scout presence in that region."

"Understood sir."

"Provide me with those numbers tomorrow; I need them for our records."

"Yes sir." Murray left with a salute.

■

# *Virupatchi, 1780*

*Thai pirandhal vazhi pirakkum.*

As the month of *Thai* begins, a path emerges.

One day, in the month of *Thai*, a message arrived that stirred excitement throughout the village:

Hyder Ali's son, Tipu Sultan, was on his way to Virupatchi, bringing with him twelve cannon carts and hundreds of guns, accompanied by five thousand infantry and a thousand cavalrymen.

Rani Velu felt a huge wave of relief, and a smile brightened her face. She offered her gratitude to the Goddess Raja Rajeswari, finally feeling a sense of hope.

◆

After a long wait that stretched over several months, Hyder's Mysore troops finally made their entrance into the village. Better late than never, the rani's army reassured itself with a collective sigh of relief. *Aadi*, marking the middle of the year and often viewed as an inauspicious time for fresh starts, gracefully gave way to *Avani*, a Tamil month that promised renewal. The sun hung high in the sky, its fierce rays pouring down like molten gold, illuminating every corner of Virupatchi. The vibrant colors of the village—rich greens of the fields, the earthy browns of the houses, and the brilliant hues of blooming flowers—seemed to dance in the warm, shimmering glow, creating a scene that felt almost magical.

Villagers began to gather in the expansive fields, their vibrant clothing creating a striking contrast against the lush green grass.

The paths winding towards the mansion thrummed with life, the lively chatter intertwining with the soft rustle of leaves stirred by the gentle breeze. As the crowd swelled, they spilled onto the streets, transforming them into a vibrant sea of color and sound. At the forefront of the procession, a battalion of soldiers marched with precision, their rifles glinting in the sunlight. In the center marched Tipu Sultan, proudly holding his famous sword. At the entrance of the mansion stood Rani Velu, welcoming the son of Hyder Ali, her fierce warriors flanking her, adorned in intricate military regalia that shimmered in the light.

On his journey to Kancheepuram to confront William Baillie of the East India Company, Tipu Sultan, a twenty-eight-year-old battle-hardened prince, had arrived in Virupatchi to personally deliver the troops as directed by his father.

As Tipu approached Rani Velu, he spoke earnestly, "Mother! I wish you triumph in your noble endeavor. Hyder Ali, my father, always taught me to support you." He presented her with the golden idol of her family deity, Goddess Raja Rajeshwari. Rani Velu accepted the offering, her eyes reflecting deep gratitude as they looked unto him. Gopal's eyes sparkled with wonder at the sight of the Goddess Raja Rajeshwari's idol, a symbol of victory for Rani Velu.

Kuyili carefully scooped a pinch of vibrant vermilion from a small gold casket, its rich hue glimmering in the sunlight. With a steady hand, she approached Rani Velu, her heart swelling with pride as she gently traced a line across the warrior's forehead, bestowing a sacred blessing. The crowd, a sea of eager faces, erupted into a chorus of fervent chants, their arms raised high in unison. "Long live the braveheart, Rani Velu Nachiyar! Hail King Muthu Vadukanatha Oodaya Thevar!" they shouted, their voices intertwining like a powerful wave, reverberating off the surrounding hills. The air crackled with energy, alive with the spirit of hope and defiance, as the cheers cascaded through the gathering, igniting the hearts of all who stood witness to this moment of unity and strength.

The warriors fell into formation, each soldier instinctively finding his place within the meticulously organized regiments. In a breathtaking moment, the sky appeared to descend, enveloping the armies in a cascade of shimmering light that danced across their armor. It felt as if the heavens themselves were showering the earth with fragrant rose water, a divine tribute to Rani Velu's expected victory.

The first regiment to step forward was Periya's sword brigade, their blades glinting like polished silver, reflecting the golden rays of the sun and creating a dazzling spectacle.

Following them was the Udaiyal female army, fierce and resolute, their eyes aflame with determination. They were led by the indomitable Kuyili, a figure of strength whose commanding presence inspired unwavering respect from all who beheld her.

Next, Chinna's *valari* regiment advanced with a fluid grace, their movements synchronized and harmonious, each soldier a testament to their rigorous training and unity.

Behind them marched an array of local chieftain forces—seasoned warriors who had journeyed from Sivaganga, responding to the rani's secret messages that called for regrouping. At least twenty smaller regiments joined the ranks, each comprising around fifty members, their banners fluttering proudly in the breeze. Among these were the Kattikkottai Ramachandra Swamy battalion, known for their fierce loyalty; the Varappur Nanniyambalam battalion, famed for their battle tactics; and the Thiruppachetti Seruvaikkaran battalion, whose reputation for valor preceded them.

With her soldiers marching firmly on either side of the street, their feet striking the ground in unison to the rhythmic beats of the *murasu* war drums, the atmosphere buzzed with anticipation. In the center, flanked by her soldiers on either side, emerged Rani Velu Nachiyar, regal and poised on her war chariot, embarking on a journey that would etch her name into history. The thunderous cheers of the crowd surged like a tidal wave, echoing off the walls of the surrounding row houses.

Behind her, the Mysore forces—infantry and cavalry—moved with purpose, led by the formidable Commander Syed Karki, whose keen eyes surveyed the unfolding scene.

At the end, the heavy cannon carts rumbled forward, their wheels creaking as they carried the promise of power.

Tipu Sultan and Gopal Nayakar stood at a distance, watching intently as Rani Velu's buoyant army, fueled by elation and determination, gradually faded from their sight, a vision of hope and defiance against the horizon.

■

# *Madurai Outskirts, 1780*

Dusk settled over the horizon as Rani Velu's army advanced into the rugged outskirts of Madurai. The air was thick with the scent of earth when they arrived at Kochadai, just northwest of the Madurai kingdom. Shadows lengthened as they set up camp near the ancient Karuppan temple, its weathered stones whispering tales of battles long past. After a simple meal of millet and lentils, weary soldiers surrendered to sleep beneath a canopy of stars.

Before the first light of dawn could break the darkness, a thunderous explosion shattered the stillness, echoing across the countryside. A hundred paces ahead, Mallari Rayan stood confidently, flanked by his vast army. Clad in gleaming armor that caught the faint light, he wore a smirk that dripped with disdain. It was a smile that spoke volumes, proclaiming his certainty that he would easily crush her, a mere woman, beneath the weight of his might.

Rani Velu scanned the sea of soldiers, their faces a mix of determination and anticipation, all eyes locked on her as they awaited her command. She motioned the Maruthu brothers forward, her voice ringing clear above the clamor. "Warriors! I had envisioned our battle taking place within the walls of Sivaganga. Yet, our enemies are already upon us. Let Periya's army and Chinna's forces surge into the fray!"

In an instant, a vibrant flag shot up into the sky, a vivid banner of defiance that signaled their readiness to fight. "We stand ready for war! Long live Rani Velu Nachiyar!"

The Maruthu brothers ignited the troops with passionate cries, their voices blending into a fierce chorus as they faced the encroaching enemy. For every soldier that Periya struck down, Chinna sent forth three more, each one falling like a ragdoll to the ground. Meanwhile, the sepoys, native soldiers enlisted by the English, stumbled and hesitated behind Mallari Rayan's forces, struggling against the relentless onslaught of Periya's and Chinna's warriors. From the very start of the clash, the Maruthu brothers held the upper hand.

At a critical moment, Chinna drew back his arm, focusing intently as he launched his deadly *valari*. In an instant, Mallari Rayan's head was severed, rolling onto the battlefield with a heavy thud against the dirt.

The enemy forces retreated, their banners fluttering in disarray as they vanished into the horizon. the rani's *kombu* war trumpets blared triumphantly, a resonant call that echoed across the battlefield, announcing victory to all within earshot.

The first battle ended before it even started.

◆

As Rani Velu's army marched into Madurai, their jubilant shouts mingling with the rhythmic beat of drums, Ranga Rayan, brother of Mallari Rayan, stormed into the Sivaganga palace, breathless and wide-eyed. The servants, still bleary-eyed from a long night spent serving the English officers and the Arcot prince, were jolted into action by Ranga's wild gestures. They darted through the shadowy corridors, their bare feet whispering against the cool stone floors, desperately trying to wake the slumbering officers and the prince.

Just hours earlier, the halls had echoed with laughter and clinking cups, early victory celebrations spiraling into drunken revelry that left the prince and his companions sprawled in a haze of drowsiness, drunken stupor and intoxication.

As Ranga flung open the heavy wooden doors, his hair tousled and clothes askew, a woman quickly wrapped a thin sheet around

her waist, slipping quietly from beneath the covers. The Arcot prince, his eyes still heavy with sleep, fumbled to dress, his mind racing to grasp Ranga's urgent message; he snatched his tunic from the floor and bolted into the night.

"For your sake, my brother stood against Velu at Kochadai in Madurai. They took his head," Ranga's voice thundered, reverberating off the stone walls of the palace, his fists clenched tightly. The flickering torches cast shadows that danced like specters of vengeance around the room. "My fury will not rest until I see them crushed beneath my feet."

The assembled officers exchanged tense glances, the weight of his words settling heavily upon them. Without hesitation, they nodded in unison, and a plan was forged.

A large, formidable army from Sivaganga, banners snapping in the wind, rallied behind Ranga, their resolve ignited as they marched forth to confront Rani Velu.

◆

As news somehow trickled down from the palace to the streets of Sivaganga of Rani Velu marching towards Sivaganga with a mighty army from Virupatchi, having already defeated Mallari Rayan, the townsfolk erupted in celebration.

Excitement buzzed in the air: Will their queen emerge victorious? How can they help the rani in her quest? Whispers of hope and plans filled the corners of homes as they eagerly anticipated her arrival, leaving their doors wide open in welcoming anticipation.

◆

Rani Velu's army marched steadily from Madurai towards Thiruppuvanam. As they traversed the outskirts of the village of Silaiman, a sudden explosion shattered the stillness of the flat terrain. Instantly, the Sivaganga warriors sprang into action, swiftly arranging themselves into a tight formation.

This quick maneuver caught Ranga's Arcot soldiers off guard.

A line of horses trotted to the side, aligning themselves in columns that seemed to suggest the army was entirely Syed's Mysore cavalry. After a few columns of cavalry had assembled, Syed's Mysore infantry commanders began organizing their troops into structured formations; tall, sturdy men occupied the front rows while thinner, shorter men nestled behind them in the rear. Those at the forefront wielded muskets and sported tumbrils around their waists, while those in back clutched swords and spears. The imposing figures in front turned sideways to exchange smiles, a silent affirmation of trust: 'I have your back.'

An unfamiliar battalion marched up to join the infantry—a stark contrast to the bearded Arcot men—tall, muscular figures, with large mustaches adorned with swords and metal boomerangs hanging from sheaths at their waists, held massive shields aloft. The sight of these warriors stirred unease among the Arcot soldiers' stomachs. Leading this formidable group were brothers Periya and Chinna of Sivaganga, standing shoulder to shoulder with Syed's infantry.

Ranga Rayan galloped towards the frontline soldiers, urgently rallying those who stood frozen in shock at this strange coalition's formation. Just then, another column of cavalry joined ranks with the Sivaganga troops on their right for added protection. The Sivaganga warriors and Syed's infantry now found themselves flanked on both sides by Syed's cavalry as they readied themselves for battle clad in full gear. The front rows aimed their muskets towards the Arcot soldiers while Sivaganga forces gripped tightly onto swords and *valaris* as they awaited orders.

Syed's army donned cream-colored military uniforms, while the Arcot army was clad in green with black turbans. The Sivaganga warriors were dressed in white.

The muddy terrain lay flat before them; sparse bushes barely obscured visibility between armies separated by over one *kadam*, equivalent to a kilometer. Though impatience nagged them to attack without delay, they remained poised for orders.

The Arcot commander sat far behind his forces on horseback guarding Ranga, flanked by his personal guards as he surveyed the enemy lines spread out before him across the plains. Though they seemed distant and posed no immediate threat at that moment, he could see nearly every soldier standing opposite him clearly. He was taken aback upon noticing a group of women clad in sarees riding horses while wielding swords and sticks; this peculiar sight left him puzzled regarding the nature of the opposing army's composition. Gradually realizing that it represented an allied force—an eclectic one at that—he felt uncertain about whether his troops could effectively engage them in battle. One thing was evident: they were significantly outnumbered, one against nine.

Rani Velu stood atop a rocky outcrop, her keen eyes scanning the dusty plains where Ranga Rayan's Arcot soldiers stood. The sun glinted off their armor, revealing a force that, while numerous, could not rival the sheer might of her own army. Her heart swelled with pride as she surveyed her troops: five thousand infantry, their ranks lined with glinting spears and guns; a thousand cavalry, horses snorting and stamping with restless energy; and another thousand battle-hardened Sivaganga warriors, each bearing the scars of past conflicts. The sight of her formidable force stirred a sense of confidence within her; she knew they could sweep aside the Arcot soldiers with ease. With a prudent mind, she chose to hold back her precious gunpowder for a more critical clash.

The conch sounded.

With a sharp nod, she turned to Chinna, her trusted commander, and signaled him to unleash the *valari* regiment, their banners snapping in the wind as they prepared to charge. For a moment, they bowed their heads in prayer to their individual deities.

Rani Velu took a deep breath, whispering her Goddess Raja Rajeswari's name before exhaling slowly to calm the fluttering excitement within her chest. The enemy army took its first hesitant steps towards the rani's army; there was no fervor in their shouts nor courage reflected on their faces as they faced down Sivaganga blades.

Rani Velu scrutinized the advancing enemy lines across the wide expanse separating them from her own troops. *Valaris* poured from the heavens, a torrential cascade of steel and fury. The sickening crack of bone echoed as heads snapped back, limbs fell away, and scattered remnants of the fallen littered the ground like discarded toys. Chinna's warriors took aim at the advancing Arcot infantry, their faces set in grim determination. The soldiers behind them faltered, uncertainty rippling through their ranks like a shiver. Though their shields were gripped tightly against their chests, the tremor in their legs and the hesitant shuffle of their feet revealed a deep-seated fear, a gnawing doubt that gnawed at their resolve.

Next, the Sivaganga warriors unleashed another barrage of *valaris*, their deadly projectiles slicing through the air towards the Arcot cavalry. Horses reared back in terror, their eyes wide with panic as they stumbled and collided, sending riders sprawling into the dust. The thunder of hooves echoed chaotically, punctuated by the frantic whinnies of horses and the shouts of disoriented soldiers. Along the flanks of the cavalry, yawning gaps gaped where once there had been formation, revealing the crumbling discipline that had unraveled under the onslaught.

The Arcot infantry faltered further still as its formation began crumbling; chaos reigned under a new motto: Every man for himself! A soldier clad in black turban broke away from what remained of his comrades and hurled a spear high into the air that landed just before Chinna's feet with a thud. It was an invitation for Chinna and his men to run towards the distraught enemies—yet some young Arcot soldiers surged forward recklessly fueled by misguided ambition for glory rather than command or caution.

Chinna observed a man raise his spear and timed his *valari* to launch precisely before the spear flew from the man's grip. The *valari* struck true, severing the man's head just as he turned away to rejoin his line. The bloody head collided with a nearby soldier, splattering him with crimson before it thudded onto the ground.

Thunderous cheer erupted from the Sivaganga army, while alarmed cries and howls echoed from the enemy ranks. Chinna charged forth to a young man whose black beard peeked out from beneath a tattered black turban. He seemed familiar, but there was no time for recognition; the young man was closing in fast.

Rani Velu signaled Periya to lead his men. The warring men's shields crashed together, causing Periya to momentarily lose his footing. Behind him, a spearman lunged forward, aiming for what he thought was Periya—now sprawled on the ground. Regaining his balance in a quick sprint, Periya pulled his shield close and plunged his weapon into the spearman before he could attack again, then readied himself against the approaching youth. When he swept aside the young man's shield, he fell back, and as the turban rolled off, Periya recognized him as one of those who had been part of the treachery at Kalaiyarkoil.

An axe blade crashed against Periya's shield; he ducked just in time as it pulled back, and the axe instead struck the space where Chinna's face had been mere moments earlier. Bent low, Chinna caught sight of green Salwar fabric before him and drove his sword into it; with a sickening crunch, the leg gave way beneath its owner. At the same moment, another attacker lunged with an axe aimed at Chinna's side, but Periya had anticipated this move and swiftly severed the man's wrist; both the weapon and shield clattered to the ground, rendered useless.

With their shields resting on their shoulders like armor forged of resolve, the Sivaganga army surged forward; cracks began to appear in enemy lines under their relentless assault. Soldiers drove axes deep into skulls and thrust swords into chests while *valaris* flew through air to slice at any remaining foes still standing firm.

Fighting alongside Chinna's men, Periya smashed his sword against an enemy soldier's shield guarding a leader behind him. The soldier's hand was severed at the elbow yet he remained upright—screaming and staggering towards another soldier swinging wildly with desperation. Periya intercepted him with practiced ease:

twisting that wrist until it bent painfully backward before burying his sword deep within that enemy's chest.

The air crackled with the anguished sounds of battle—bitter curses mingled with desperate cries for mercy, each echoing off the blood-soaked earth where the Arcot soldiers braced themselves.

The cavalry found themselves ensnared in a suffocating fog of confusion and dread; never had they faced such a relentless assault from the Periya and Chinna regiments, who advanced with a chilling precision that sought to shatter their formation. In a heartbeat, horses buckled, their legs struck by brutal blows, collapsing under the weight of their own panic, while their heart-wrenching neighs cut through the cacophony of chaos that enveloped the battlefield.

Ranga Rayan felt the weight of impending doom pressing down on his troops, a suffocating darkness gathering like storm clouds poised to drench the parched land below. His hasty retreat, flanked by a cadre of loyal guards, only underscored the sinking morale among the beleaguered soldiers who remained, trapped in a swirling tempest of chaos and confusion. The remaining Arcot horsemen, their bodies slick with sweat and grime from the relentless struggle, were locked in fierce combat, swords clashing and shouts echoing through the din. Each warrior fought with desperate ferocity, but they found themselves ensnared in a web of violence, their path to safety obstructed by the very enemies they battled, making any attempt to withdraw a perilous gamble.

Rani Velu, her eyes blazing with fury, ordered Chinna and his band of fierce warriors to pursue Ranga Rayan and his loyal bodyguards relentlessly. She was resolute in her mission to snuff out any glimmer of hope among those desperate souls escaping the relentless slaughter that stained the battlefield. As she raised her hand to issue further commands, the air thick with tension, Chinna swiftly drew his weapon. In a single, fluid motion, he aimed at Ranga, his focus unyielding. With a sharp crack, he severed Ranga's head from his shoulders, executing the act with the same ruthless efficiency that had marked the demise of Ranga's brother, Mallari.

The severed head rolled away, its eyes still wide in shock, a grim testament to the brutality of the moment.

The clash between the cavalry erupted into a brutal hunt, the air thick with the sounds of clashing steel and the cries of wounded horses. Chinna's men, fierce and relentless, surged forward like a tide, methodically dismantling the remnants of the Arcot cavalry with calculated precision. Chinna emerged from their pursuit, carrying Ranga's severed head aloft as a grim trophy. The enemy had been thoroughly defeated; only a handful of soldiers crawled off the field before meeting a brutal end.

As he brought Ranga's head to the rani, Chinna experienced an unforgettable moment; his heart swelled with pride, and his eyes met hers. Her expression radiated a steadfast pride and appreciation that pierced through the surrounding chaos. In that fleeting moment, he offered her a subtle nod, a gesture steeped in unspoken understanding, as if they were two souls tethered by the deep bond of guilt and grief forged in the heat of battle, even as the world around them descended into disorder.

The air crackled with tension as the battle neared its conclusion, the once-thundering clash of weapons now dwindling to sporadic skirmishes. Only a couple of *nazhigais* had gone by, but the vibrant colors now muted against the bloodstained earth. The warriors, weary yet resolute, surveyed the battlefield, each breath heavy with the scent of smoke and sweat. Shadows danced across the ground as the sun began to dip below the horizon, casting long silhouettes of the remaining fighters, who lay down for a rest.

Rani Velu's eyes sparkled with delight as she regarded Chinna. "That was remarkably swift, Chinna," she exclaimed, her voice ringing with approval.

A warm smile spread across his face, and he bowed deeply, his forehead nearly touching the ground, his hand pressed firmly against his heart in a gesture of utmost respect. "Your Majesty," he replied, his tone humble yet filled with pride at her recognition.

Periya and Chinna stood at the edge of the battlefield, their eyes sweeping over the grim tableau where enemy soldiers lay sprawled across the charred earth. The majority wore black turbans that flapped lifelessly in the breeze, while a few rare Mysore cream-colored ones stood out like ghostly apparitions among the fallen. The stillness was punctuated by the distant cries of the wounded, their moans weaving through the air like a haunting melody. Lifeless bodies stared vacantly, some gazing blankly at the vast blue sky above, others fixed on the blood-soaked ground, their final resting place. The remnants of the enemy force lay defeated, scattered like broken dolls, while only a handful of soldiers managed to crawl away, their movements desperate and slow. Yet, even they could not escape the inevitable fate that awaited them, as shadows of death loomed closer with each agonizing breath.

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"In time for a hearty dinner," Syed declared, his voice booming with satisfaction, eliciting a relieved smile from Rani Velu. The soldiers, their stomachs rumbling in unison, watched with eager anticipation as the evening unfolded. Away from the clamor of the battlefield, the camp came to life with the sound of canvas rustling in the gentle breeze. Tents began to rise like colorful mushrooms sprouting from the earth: a grand pavilion for the rani, another for Chinna and Periya, and a large tent for Syed and his diverse assembly of troops, encompassing both Syed's and Sivaganga warriors.

Syed's military cooks sprang into action, their movements choreographed with precision as they set up neat rows of hearths along the streambank. They filled the fire pits with sturdy wooden logs, delicate twigs, and glistening black coal, creating a warm glow that promised comfort. Large cauldrons, their surfaces gleaming from a thorough scrubbing, were positioned over the flames, ready to transform simple ingredients into a feast. Nearby, sacks brimming with rice, lentils, and spices lined up beside the ovens, each bursting with potential.

With a flourish, the cooks retrieved ornate spice boxes from their carts, their contents spilling forth with vibrant colors and intoxicating aromas. This preparation was not merely routine; it was a celebration of their victories together—one that, although easily won, held the promise of camaraderie and shared triumph. The air buzzed with excitement, a palpable sense of unity and gratitude swirling amidst the scent of impending feasting.

The Sivaganga cooks united with their counterparts from Mysore, gathering around a circle of earthen ovens that glowed with the warmth of glowing embers. They expertly prepared sweet *pongal*, its golden grains shimmering with generous drizzles of ghee, while an array of colorful sweets and savory dishes filled the tables, each more enticing than the last. The air was thick with a rich tapestry of scents; the deep, spiced aroma of mutton *biryani*, infused with cardamom and cloves, intertwined with the tangy fragrance of fish *sambar*, creating a mouthwatering symphony that danced through the camp. As soldiers trudged towards the nearby stream, their boots squelching in the mud, they sought to wash away the remnants of battle—the dried blood and grime clinging to their skin. Nearby, the dedicated *hakims* and *siddha* doctors worked diligently in their makeshift tents, tending to the wounded with care and precision, their hands moving swiftly as they applied herbal pastes and bandages, the atmosphere heavy with both the weight of suffering and the hope of recovery.

Later that evening, despite the relatively low number of casualties on their side, funeral pyres flickered vividly for the fallen warriors of Sivaganga, while deep graves were dug for the soldiers from Mysore. No prisoners were taken; wounded foes met swift execution while others fled in terror. Relaxing in his tent after the easy success where they didn't have to fight much, Chinna and Periya found themselves struggling to digest a heavy serving of *biryani* when Rani Velu entered.

◆

"Congratulations once again, my brave sons, Periya and Chinna! Despite the unexpected onslaught from Ranga Rayan, you both handled yourselves remarkably well," the rani declared as she swept into the room, her regal presence accentuated by the vibrant silk of her gown. Kuyili and Syed flanked her, their expressions a mix of admiration and respect.

"Why, my queen, indeed, indeed," the brothers stammered, their faces flushed as they rose from their seats, executing a hurried, somewhat clumsy bow that made their exhaustion evident. The air was thick with anticipation as the rani continued, "What shall be our next course of action? Should we set off to Thiruppuvanam at dawn tomorrow?" Her voice was steady, yet it carried an undercurrent of urgency.

"Yes, Your Majesty," they replied in unison, their resolve hardening.

"Make sure to take ample rest tonight. The forthcoming battles may be tougher than the last two. And, we don't know when and where we will be confronted. The enemies are adept at ambush," the rani urged, her brow furrowed with concern for their well-being.

"Your Majesty, we will rest. You need not worry about us. We are acutely aware that we face the Nawab's son and the British forces there. After all these years of struggle, we cannot afford to falter now, can we?" Periya asserted, his voice firm with determination.

"Alright," the rani conceded, her gaze lingering on them, a mixture of pride and apprehension swirling in her heart.

■

# *Manamadurai, 1779*

The people of Thiruppuvanam buzzed with excitement as they eagerly awaited Rani Velu's return. After eight long years, the moment had finally arrived for them to see their beloved rani again. The streets brimmed with life; no one remained indoors. Elderly men and women, young adults, and children filled the streets, standing like fervent worshippers in quiet expectation. The knowledge that she had vanquished the Rayan brothers in her previous two battles only heightened the thrill in the air.

As dawn broke, casting a soft golden light over the town, Rani Velu's army began its triumphant march. Flower petals rained down from above, showering the soldiers in vibrant colors. Chinna's regiment led the way with heads held high, followed closely by Periya's troops. Next came Kuyili's Udaiyal women's army, marching with fierce determination. At the heart of the procession was Rani Velu, resplendent in her war chariot, flanked by the chieftains' battalions. Syed's formidable army trailed behind, moving with an impressive quietude. Bringing up the rear were the cannon carts, laden with weapons and supplies, while the military servants' families—women and children alike—joyfully walked alongside the carts. Though they had been urged to remain at home, their desire to be part of the rani's grand procession was too strong to resist.

Rani Velu intentionally chose the Madurai route, despite it being part of an enemy kingdom. This choice came after months of scouting missions, heated discussions, strategic planning, and

meticulous preparations. By the time Tipu arrived with his army, she had firmly resolved to take the Madurai path. As they traveled, local men rallied to their cause, brandishing *silambu sticks*, spears, sickles, and other improvised weapons fashioned from tools discovered in the thatched huts that dotted the road from Madurai to Thiruppuvanam. In the end, they gathered a formidable and diverse force of ten thousand warriors.

Upon reaching the Thiruppuvanam fort, the weary army settled in for a much-needed rest. After sharing a modest dinner, the rani stood before her troops, her voice steady and commanding.

"My brave warriors, we have triumphed easily in our last two battles. However, do not underestimate the Nawab's son and the English; their pride has been wounded, and they will retaliate with greater numbers, superior weaponry, and relentless aggression. We must not grow complacent or indulge in the sweetness of our recent victories. Instead, let us remain vigilant, preparing ourselves to face the formidable forces that lie ahead. Remember, the English are not to be taken lightly. They possess everything: local scouts who know the land, soldiers for sheer numbers, lethal weaponry, and, above all, a keen sense of scheming and cunning."

The soldiers responded with a resounding cheer, their voices rising in unison, eager to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to the rani.

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At the stroke of midnight, a series of loud bangs echoed against the fort's heavy wooden door. The towering doors, each over seven feet tall and a foot thick, rattled under the relentless pounding. Voices rose in urgency. "Please open it!" A massive crowd had amassed before the fort, their breath visible in the chilly night air. A tall, robust man from the throng struck the door again with force. Finally, the heavy doors creaked open, allowing the crowd to surge inside.

The imposing figure stepped forward, bowing deeply to the queen with his hands pressed together in reverence. "Mother!

Your Majesty, we are overjoyed to see you. We stand united in your service. The Thiruppachetti spear army, the Madakkottai spy corps, the Chatharavankottai spinning disk battalion, and the Vijayamanickam sword battalion are all here. Together, let us reclaim our lost homeland. If we do not act, we risk everything," he declared passionately. At his words, Rani Velu clapped her hands in acknowledgment, her eyes gleaming with determination.

At that moment, a small boy leaned in and whispered a message into Kuyili's ear. The secret was swiftly relayed to Rani Velu, who stood before an eager crowd, their eyes filled with anticipation.

Recognizing their curiosity, Rani Velu raised her voice, "Soldiers! A new message has arrived, and it is my duty to share it with you. Our enemies are preparing for another battle against us. Three thousand soldiers, commanded by English officers Martin, Brighton, and the Nawab's formidable general Buri Khan, await us there. The Nawab's son is planning to fight us on the banks of the Vaigai river at Manamadurai, for if our army crosses Manamadurai, we will enter the Sivaganga border."

"Tomorrow, we shall confront the enemy on the battlefield," Rani Velu declared. "Let us prepare!"

"Yes, let us prepare," roared the soldiers in unison.

"Soldiers! It's time to relax. Starting tomorrow, we will have no time to rest, and that will be the case from now on."

The men settled in, their muscles relaxing as they found their places. Those who had journeyed with Rani Velu mingled with the newcomers, all seeking a moment of peace.

In the heart of the fort, Rani Velu lay in a quiet chamber, the weight of the day's events pressing heavily upon her. Sleep eluded her, as tormenting thoughts of how to confront the enemy invaded her mind. Whenever she did manage to close her eyes, alarm bells would echo in her consciousness, jolting her awake with a sense of guilt for resting when a daunting battle awaited her at dawn.

The alliance of Buri Khan, Brighton and Martin was a formidable one; it was a battle-hardened military alliance where operational brilliance had been honed through years of conflict. Each encounter was a chess match, with Buri, Brighton and Martin employing a blend of deception and audacity that left their adversaries scrambling. Tales of their cunning tactics rippled through the ranks of their troops and echoed in the enemy camps, solidifying their reputation as a master strategic alliance. Their victories were not merely numbers on a ledger; they were stories of daring maneuvers and unexpected triumphs that inspired loyalty and admiration among their soldiers, marking them as a legendary alliance in the annals of military history.

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The Vaigai river wound through Manamadurai, its waters reflecting the tension in the air. On the northern bank, the English army, a mix of Englishmen and sepoys, stood poised, their uniforms crisp and weapons glinting in the sunlight. Across the river, Rani Velu's forces gathered on the southern bank, a sea of vibrant colors and fierce determination. Brighton, Martin, and Buri Khan led the English troops, their expressions steely and resolute. Meanwhile, Periya, Chinna, and Kuyili commanded the rani's army, their eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of movement.

The English soldiers remained still, a wall of anticipation. "Why aren't they starting?" Rani Velu asked, her voice laced with impatience. Confusion rippled through the ranks, each side waiting for the other to make the first move. "Maybe we should wait," suggested Syed, trotting up to the rani, his brow furrowed with concern.

"On the contrary, let us move," the rani commanded, her voice cutting through the uncertainty like a blade. The catapult battalion was the first to wade into the river, followed closely by the infantry units. Even as the water rose to their knees, the enemy remained unmoving.

With a fierce resolve, Rani Velu ordered her battalions to commence the assault. Catapults launched heavy stones towards the opposing forces, while arrows arced through the air like deadly rain. A hundred enemy soldiers fell, their cries mingling with the chaos of battle.

Brighton commanded his artillery with a steely resolve. Waves of Rani Velu's soldiers collapsed, their bodies floating on the river. The once clear waters of the Vaigai river were now stained crimson with the blood of the Sivaganga warriors. The English army, armed with thirty cannons and a thousand rifles, unleashed a relentless barrage, picking off the warriors as easily as one would hunt storks and sparrows.

Yet, undeterred by the mounting casualties, Rani Velu's troops surged into the fray, crossing the river. The Maruthu brothers charged into the enemy ranks, their swords flashing as they struck down foes, igniting a spark of courage among their comrades. It was at that moment that the casualties on the English side began to mount. Though Rani Velu's army managed to push back the enemy army on the northern bank, Martin stood firm, directing the battle with unyielding determination.

Despite the bullets, the rani's entire army successfully crossed the river over to the northern bank. After hours of fierce fighting, Rani Velu gathered Chinna, Periya, Kuyili and Syed for a crucial consultation. "We cannot hope to prevail without eliminating Brighton and Martin," Chinna declared fiercely. "Grant me permission to take his head."

"Chinna, no! I took a look at them. They are young and that makes them a worthy opponent. I admire their bravery. Capturing them, rather than killing them, will only elevate our honor. That is the essence of a true warrior. We must adopt a plan of action," the rani proclaimed.

She continued, "Let our artillery and gunners conceal themselves in the dense reeds behind the English army. From the north, an army of horses led by Periya will charge; from the south, cavalry

units under Syed's command; from the east, a battalion of women warriors led by Kuyili; and from the west, an army of women from the Thirupachethi sword battalion," she instructed.

"I will charge right into the enemy army on an elephant." Rani Velu declared. The soldiers erupted in cheers. It was here, on the banks of Manamadurai, that Rani Velu first embarked on the monumental task of confronting the Englishmen on the battlefield.

The red coats occupied higher ground, crouching low or lying still as they readied themselves for battle against the rani's army advancing within range. With a sword raised high above his head, Martin bellowed, "Fire!" The front lines steadied their aim before pulling triggers simultaneously; moments later came a return volley from Syed on instructions from the rani—a cacophony erupted across gray morning skies as gunfire filled air thick with acrid smoke wafting through fields now stained blackened by powder residue.

Another round of gunfire erupted as Syed's cavalry splashed through the slush, their boots sinking into the muddy pools. Ordered to advance, a third volley struck the rani's army just as Syed signaled for action. The enemy was now within three hundred paces. The hidden northern battery of artillery that the rani had strategically placed, concealed behind a cluster of trees, unleashed its barrage. Brighton and Martin were caught off guard by the close-range fire; before they could pivot their muskets towards the source, many fell to the ground. However, they quickly regrouped and brought forth their next line of soldiers with muskets raised, unleashing their own volley. Most shots went wide and missed entirely while a few found their targets, causing Rani Velu to clench her jaw against the anguished cries echoing around her. She took in the chaotic scene and signaled to her cavalry.

Noticing gunfire from Syed's cavalry from the front, Martin ordered his horsemen to prepare their aim. Soon after, both sides engaged in a fierce exchange of fire. The Syed cavalry targeted horse legs with precision; several steeds on the English side collapsed under their assault. The relentless cycle of loading cartridges, advancing

lines, and firing continued for only a few *nazhigais*; soldiers were falling on the English side, even those stationed in the rear were not spared. As casualties mounted across the battlefield, it became clear to the English that they had exhausted their supply of gunpowder.

"Charge!" bellowed Martin. The red coats sprinted down the slick slope while trying to maintain their footing on the slippery river sands; sepoys followed closely behind but struggled as spears thrust towards them from the sides. The rani's women army sprang from the east and the west, sandwiching the Britishers and Arcot army, raining *valaris*, wielding swords and spears.

Those in cream robes climbing up lost their grip in the sucking mud and were trampled by waves of their own comrades surging forward with battle fervor. Syed watched this unfolding chaos with discontent; yet what appeared as an organized charge from the English was nothing more than a disordered scramble through muck—men stumbling over one another amid flailing bayonets—while the Sivaganga chieftains wielded swords and axes with fierce determination against them.

Rani Velu sat high atop a majestic elephant, its massive ears flapping gently as it ambled forward. The sun glinted off the polished blade of the sword she gripped firmly in her left hand, while her right hand held the spear, its sharp tip gleaming with anticipation. The vibrant colors of her battle attire fluttered in the breeze, and the air crackled with the energy of impending conflict as she surveyed the vast field before her, ready to lead another batch of warriors into the fray.

"Advance!" roared Buri Khan, watching her as his soldiers began to falter under pressure. He sensed a loss of momentum but knew he could not allow an attack to stall. Yet his men pushed deeper into the waiting blades and spear points, surging forward over fallen comrades with a thunderous roar that echoed across the battlefield. Syed was taken aback; he had never before heard such a sound from English troops. "So they can shout too," he mused with a chuckle directed at his guard. "Kill them all!" he commanded.

The Sivaganga soldiers kept their shields low, slashing and stabbing at every opening they could find amidst the chaos of battle. A blade might glide past a thigh only for another to strike true against armor plating nearby. Meanwhile, cavalrymen dismounted from their horses and plunged into hand-to-hand combat among swirling chaos where muskets had lost their edge—now it was back to basics: fighting fiercely with swords, spears, and any other weapon within reach amidst this brutal melee.

Though the enemies wielded advanced rifles and cannons, they crumbled before the might of Rani Velu's spear and sword. Martin hurled a spear at the rani, but she deftly caught it in her left hand and retaliated by hurling it towards his legs. He stumbled and collapsed to the ground. Simultaneously, Buri Khan, a smirk playing on his lips, charged towards her elephant on horseback, brandishing his sword. Their blades met with a sharp clang. She moved with remarkable speed, striking him with precision and severing his hands. He tumbled from his mount. The rani's relentless assault sparked a fierce uprising, engulfing the battlefield in fiery chaos and the acrid scent of gunpowder. Brighton was severely injured by the women warriors. The Vaigai river ran a deep crimson, reflecting the anguish and valor of the fallen, blurring the lines of blame for the devastation wrought.

From the shelter of the swaying reeds, Rani Velu's artillery thundered, unleashing a merciless barrage upon the retreating cowards, their cries drowned out by the roar of cannon fire. Sensing their imminent doom, Brighton, Martin and Buri Khan discarded all pretense of bravery, their faces pale as they fled in desperation towards the sanctuary of the Tirupattur Fort, their once-proud banners trailing like ghosts behind them.

The ground was strewn with bodies, a gruesome tapestry of war woven from the lives lost, among which lay the valiant remains of Rani Velu's own soldiers, their sacrifices etched into the earth. The remaining troops huddled together, their faces a mixture of exhaustion and disbelief, eyes wide as they processed the carnage around them.

Rani Velu, triumphant and fierce, rode forth on her majestic elephant, the creature's powerful strides commanding respect. Awe washed over the soldiers as they gazed upon her formidable figure, clad in armor that glinted in the sun. Could a woman truly fight with such unyielding ferocity? Was it conceivable for a woman of fifty to wield such raw power and inspire such loyalty in the heat of battle?

■

# *Kalaiyarkoil Fort, 1779*

Without pausing to celebrate their hard-won victory, Rani Velu pressed onward, regal atop her grand elephant as they made their way to Kalaiyarkoil. The journey stretched northwards across four *nazhigais* at the steady pace of the elephant. She guided her troops along a slender, winding path, the dense foliage brushing against their flanks. The soldiers, filled with a quiet pride, marched in solemn silence, their hearts swelling with unspoken triumph as they followed their fearless leader.

Eight long years had slipped by. The image of her husband's face, charred and lifeless upon the pyre, haunted her as she walked. The sight of the massive mound of martyrs' bodies, a grim testament to their sacrifice, lingered in her mind. Even after all this time, that horrific memory refused to fade.

Syed's troops marched with Rani Velu and Kuyili along the winding trails leading to the incline before the Kalaiyarkoil forests. To their right meandered a dry stream bed with a damp floor beneath it. Ahead rose an incline leading up to the edge of the forest. At its western end lay Kalaiyarkoil town and its temple—eerily deserted as the English had evacuated its inhabitants for fear they might ally with Rani Velu's forces.

The townspeople longed for their rani so deeply that many secretly offered whatever tools they could spare while others hid among trees to witness the unfolding battle. As Syed's army approached the slope, those concealed in foliage erupted with muted joy upon seeing the swelling numbers.

News of Rani Velu's army advancing towards Kalaiyarkoil had reached the English. The English troops gathered atop a gentle slope, encircled by a thick forest. This elevation provided them a tactical advantage in battle. They had constructed four defensive lines, muskets poised high, allowing the rear ranks, filled with sepoys and cavalry, ample time to prepare their weapons and take their positions; already primed muskets aimed menacingly at her forces.

Rani Velu convened her commanders for a meeting. "We secured victory in the last battle, but it was a mixed engagement involving both English and Arcot forces, alongside a contingent of native soldiers. Now, we face solely the English, an enemy renowned for their tactical prowess in warfare and perhaps a handful of sepoys."

Syed bowed deeply and said, "Your Majesty, we are nearly out of gunpowder. I'm not certain we can return fire if the English attack."

"Do not fret; our numbers are vast. We will still hold guns and other weapons, and the English will be bewildered by the sheer volume of our artillery. Who knows, they might choose not to fire at all," she replied.

She instructed Syed to launch an assault on the English formation from the front with the remaining ammunition, while commanding Chinna and Periya battalions to stealthily maneuver their way to the forests behind the English army.

Two flags fluttered boldly between the rival armies: one bore the image of Hanuman, while the other showcased England's striking red-and-white stripes.

◆

Syed surveyed his lines; flanking him were his renowned light cavalry arrayed alongside infantry on both sides. The Sultan's light cavalry unit inspired both fear and respect; no one could match their horses' lightning speed. The front lines stood rigidly still; raw trepidation flickered in their eyes as they clutched loaded muskets

tightly. Syed understood their unease well, after all, the English were a formidable force.

He glanced at Rani Velu beside him; he struggled to mask his own uncertainties: Would they prevail? Would their game plans bear fruit? A few men continued muttering curses under their breath while others exchanged fearful glances and whispered nervously amongst themselves.

Syed moved along the ranks of his army, inspecting the guns, blades of swords, spears and axes while his men whispered among themselves to distract from the heavy silence that hung in the air—a silence more daunting than their earlier boasts and shouts.

Kuyili tightened her grip on the sheath, offered a brief nod to the queen, and without uttering a word, trotted over to a cluster of women gathered beneath the trees alongside the local chieftains.

"We're curious about your next choice of enemies. Will we be facing other English men soon?" asked one chieftain with a grin that held no malice. A few of Kuyili's female soldiers chuckled softly at this, prompting her to shoot them a hard stare. "Are you afraid? Of all people here, you men should feel at home. Weren't you just clamoring for English blood only yesterday?" The laughter faded from their faces.

"Enough with the jokes," Kuyili commanded firmly. "Remember what Rani Velu has instructed. Have you advised your men to maintain tight lines with discipline and not pursue the English if they retreat? Did you remind them to stick together and avoid leaving gaps? It is crucial." The chieftains nodded in agreement.

Kuyili recognized that local chieftains were even more eager than the Sivaganga soldiers to exact revenge on the English; after all, they had been forced to surrender most of their harvests to support an army that left only scraps for their families. At this rate, poverty loomed large over them all. Yet she understood that emotions would not secure victory on the battlefield; rather, they could lead to grave mistakes. She urged her chieftains not to let feelings cloud their

judgment. "Follow the rules; victory will be ours," she affirmed as they nodded in understanding.

Syed took his position along the front lines where his soldiers aimed their muskets towards the enemy formations above. Though obscured by distance—over a thousand paces—Syed suspected he could see an officer barking orders from among those wearing long English hats; likely it was their commander leading both English soldiers and a few native sepoys drafted into service behind them.

Turning back to Rani Velu—dressed in battle gear with gleaming armor, her trademark sword held firmly in her left hand and a spear poised in her right—he spoke cautiously, "Shall we start, Your Majesty?"

"The Sivaganga army has reached the forests. Yes, charge!" she declared.

"Here we go," Syed murmured before shouting out, "Charge!"

The ground trembled as five thousand pairs of feet pounded forward up the incline—muskets raised high while swords and spear handles clashed against shields amidst urgent calls from detachment leaders rallying their steadfast troops. The chieftains trailing behind knew no mercy awaited those who faltered today—only screams and death awaited them all. The Sivaganga chieftains at the back shouted fierce curses while swinging catapults and shooting arrows wildly in hopes of intimidating their foes into submission. Syed had wanted to inspire his men but realized that moment had slipped away.

Syed's forces boasted superior numbers, yet the English relentlessly charged over them down the slope. The English commander appeared resolute; his cavalry dismounted and engaged with muskets in hand. Horses that had wandered from the English ranks were rounded up by chieftains and female soldiers, herded towards the trees standing at a distance from the chaos of battle.

Rani Velu felt a twinge of unease at the relentless determination shown by the British forces. Even without their firearms, they

continued to fight fiercely. Yet, upon closer inspection, she smiled as she recognized that it was the native sepoys in red coats who were displaying such valor. It pained her to witness their own kin battling against one another, but this was typical of the English, she remarked to Kuyili with a wistful smile.

Syed's soldiers executed the rani's commands as if inspired by an unseen force guiding their actions. One soldier slammed his shield into a red coat's face, sending the unfortunate man sprawling into an advancing Englishman. Another soldier incapacitated an enemy with a spear thrust deep into his shoulder. Syed's soldier swung his blade fiercely, severing the arm of an Englishman near their general's flank. To Rani Velu's eyes, it seemed that Syed's army was holding its ground well, though she knew not how long they could withstand.

"Now!" The rani, sitting on her elephant, shouted to Kuyili as their Hanuman flag soared high and billowed wide above them. She tilted her head to catch sight of the rear lines of the English army, searching for any sign of a saffron-colored flag fluttering from beyond the tree line. Despite his rising doubts, Syed heard a conch shell blast through the cacophony of clashing blades echoing off shields. The rocky terrain amplified its sound, creating an impression that the Sivaganga troops were flanking the English from behind in numbers equal to those on the front lines.

The sepoys positioned at the rear of the English army sounded their trumpets; they pointed towards a new flag emerging from between trees—high and proud—and in that moment, realization dawned on the English commander; he sensed a shift in fortune and felt despair etch across his features. *Valaris* fell like rain from above, slicing through necks, arms, legs, and chests alike among soldiers below. In droves, members of the English army began to peel away in panic, scrambling towards the right slope as they sought refuge within the sheltering embrace of nearby woods. The commander roared for them to hold their ground but both white soldiers and sepoys understood too well what awaited them; they fled in disarray.

The sight of so many men retreating under relentless *valari*-hurling was something he had never envisioned—certainly not even in his wildest dreams.

Now was the moment to exploit the disarray of the retreating lot. With a commanding sweep of his sword, Periya signaled his men to pursue. They clashed with their enemies, picking off stragglers as the English soldiers scrambled for cover. Syed's army advanced like a well-oiled machine, moving swiftly yet maintaining formation. Syed charged towards the English commander, and before the man could react, he severed his head in one swift motion. Grasping the rolling head by its hair, Syed lifted it high for all to see. The blaring horns and resonating conches filled the air. The beleaguered English lost their resolve and began to flee in panic. However, Periya's men soon broke ranks and surged forward. Periya and Chinna sprinted eagerly towards the retreating soldiers.

"No!" shouted Syed, though he might as well have screamed underwater for all the breath he put in.

Across the battlefield, Chinna and Periya dashed joyfully towards their prey. "Chase them down; slaughter them all!" cried the brothers with fervor as they raced past Syed. He attempted to obstruct their path, insisting, "Let them run; they will not regroup."

"It doesn't matter! We want to kill them! This is our chance," Periya retorted passionately.

By then, Syed had approached Rani Velu. "It's alright, Syed, let them be," she reassured him gently. She understood that these brothers sought vengeance against the English soldiers to quench the guilt festering in their hearts—an anger that burned fiercely within them since that fateful day eight years ago in Kalaiyarkoil when they were forced to flee while witnessing their beloved ruler's brutal murder.

Majors, lieutenants, soldiers, and sepoys—all of them from the English side—ran for their lives without daring to glance back at those pursuing them. A thousand warriors brandishing swords and *silambu sticks* hunted them down relentlessly under Chinna and

Periya's command. It was no mere hunt but a scene of horrific carnage unfolding across the field. Every last English soldier met a gruesome end; none were spared from suffering violence or death at their hands. The only mercy shown by Sivaganga soldiers was reserved for native sepoys who fell to their knees in desperation, pleading for their lives while vowing never again to ally with the English forces.

Syed's horn sounded, signaling the conclusion of the battle. The English forces lay utterly defeated. Corpses blanketed the ground, staining it with dark pools of blood. Above, vultures began to circle ominously in the sky. Rani Velu surveyed the lifeless bodies before her; among them, nearly a thousand belonged to Syed's troops, while around a hundred were warriors from Sivaganga.

The following morning, she stood solemnly beside a fire consuming the dead, her expression taut and drawn. Nearby on a small hill, Syed's army diligently buried their fallen comrades. Yet even amidst the carnage and the demise of their enemies, grief and guilt gnawed at her heart after losing her husband. Seeking solitude, she ascended the burial mound that overlooked the town; she needed space to confront her emotions and reflect on her sorrow. As the exhilaration of battle faded from her mind, she settled carefully onto the earth, attempting to embrace the profound emptiness left by death. Below her, large graves were being dug as bodies were gently lowered into their final resting places while comrades wept and bid farewell with heavy hearts.

The next morning, she intended to visit the temple with Chinna and Periya—an act long overdue after eight years away from its sacred grounds. Her husband had frequented that temple often; he observed fasts faithfully, never missed a Friday prayer, attended almost every Monday without fail, and occasionally slipped away on other days under some pretext or another. His wife, Gauri Nachiyar—whom Rani Velu had never held in disdain—had been killed within those hallowed walls during prayer.

The Maruthu brothers and their fellow warriors reveled in the cool embrace of the Anaimedu sacred pond at the temple, while Rani Velu's female soldiers relished their time bathing at the serene waters of Gowri Theertham. Afterward, they gathered at the solemn site where Raja Muthu Vadukanatha Thevar and Gauri Nachiyar were laid to rest, each one honoring their memory with quiet reverence. Tears glistened in the eyes of all present, reflecting the weight of the loss.

Inside the temple, both brothers fell into deep reverie until roused by the resonant chime of the temple bell. They vividly recalled every detail of what had transpired with Rani Velu as if it had just unfolded moments ago. It was time to march towards Sivaganga palace and finally put an end to British oppression once and for all.

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The sky stretched overhead in a brilliant shade of blue, with golden rays pouring down over Kalaiyarkoil as if the heavens themselves were celebrating Rani Velu, the brothers, and Syed Karki. The strong winds of Tamil *Aavani* month whisked up warmth from the earth, swirling dust and dried leaves through the air, but they could not mask the foul odor of death that lingered from the brutal battle still fresh in memory. Foxes and vultures continued their grim contest over the remnants scattered across the battlefield. Syed's warriors had long since buried their fallen comrades; even enemy corpses received hasty burials, stripped of gold and weapons before being laid to rest without ceremony.

Syed raised a grand mound for his own men, adorning it with battered shields, tarnished armor, and personal belongings left behind. The ashes of a few brave souls were cast into a nearby stream. He and his generals had mourned at this makeshift grave, now seated at the forest's edge with heavy hearts as they gazed out over the scarred land. The previous night's revelry—filled with dancing girls—had faded into exhaustion by morning light but did little to

lift his spirits after losing many loyal warriors; some of his favored generals remained gravely injured under constant care from *hakims*.

"Let us weep tears of joy for our warriors; their deaths have brought them glory," Rani Velu said gently as she settled onto an empty chair beside him after returning from her visit to the temple and town.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Syed replied reluctantly as he rose to bow before her but felt unconvinced by her sentiment.

"Our martyrs have found a special place in heaven," Rani Velu continued softly.

"As Allah is my witness, I will avenge them all," Syed declared with an unusual weight in his voice.

"We will avenge them all," she corrected him firmly, prompting him to nod in agreement.

On further reflection, she added thoughtfully, "We've already slain them all. Our Maruthu brothers ensured none escaped alive."

For a brief moment, a flicker of hope crossed Syed's face. "Yes, Your Majesty."

But just as quickly as it appeared, that glimmer faded into shadows once more—his heart sinking deeper into an abyss filled with swirling sorrow and frustration. Despite victory celebrations filled with feasting and late-night festivities surrounding him, Rani Velu sensed that Syed was ensnared by grief.

Two days later, a retainer ushered two women clad in *burkas* into Rani Velu's tent along with several boys and a girl similarly covered. Shortly after their arrival, Rani Velu stepped into Syed's tent herself. Once they were alone following her retainer's departure, she asked gently yet pointedly: "Commander Syed, are you not curious about your family—your mother, wife, daughter? Your sons?"

"Your Majesty," he replied curtly. "I'm not in the mood for riddles or matters beyond my control."

At that moment, the *burka*-clad women and children entered his tent. Rani Velu took her leave so they could share this reunion privately; as she exited, Syed bowed deeply in gratitude for her thoughtfulness despite her own lack of family.

"My queen," Kuyili reported when her scouts returned from Virupatchi with news about Vellachi's health improving steadily there. "She will join us soon when we reclaim the palace."

"That is good to hear," Rani Velu acknowledged while settling beside a table scattered with maps spread out before them. "We must plan our next moves; let me know when Commander Syed is ready."

◆

A week later, the rani's tent became the hub of intense discussion and planning among the brothers, Syed, and Kuyili. Syed's composure had returned, and the joyful reunion had left a warm glow on the family. "My scouts report that Sultan Hyder Ali is launching an attack on Madras," Syed announced.

"Will he pull your forces to assist in this assault?" Rani Velu inquired.

"No, my queen. On the contrary, our offensive will coincide with his attack on Madras since it is the same English who have barricaded themselves in the Sivaganga palace. Even if this strike wasn't originally planned or commissioned, the Sultan will inevitably dispatch an army to seize control of Arcot's southern frontiers."

"Good, good," replied Rani Velu.

"Let us divide our forces and eliminate any smaller garrisons before we attack the Sivaganga palace," she suggested.

"Command us, Your Majesty," declared the brothers. "We will clear all minor garrisons."

"There are two targets: Tirupattur fort to the north, where English commanders Brighton and Martin are holed up, and the camps scattered throughout the villages along the trails leading to the palace," Rani Velu explained. Syed nodded in understanding

as she elaborated, "Chinna will take charge of his troops to assault Tirupattur and drive out the English, while Periya will secure the paths leading to the palace." With determination in their eyes, both brothers wasted no time and set off at once.

Kuyili and Rani Velu exited the tent as Syed turned his attention to organizing supplies and reinforcements. The brothers rallied their finest warriors, retrieved their horses from a makeshift stable, and—with the rani's blessing—embarked on their mission for redemption once more. The rani insisted they depart after a few days and they complied without hesitation.

Following the rani's directive, Syed informed Chinna, "Additional gunpowder is en route. My artillery regiment, consisting of a hundred soldiers, will accompany you."

But when nothing arrived in the next few days, Rani Velu ordered Chinna and Periya to leave anyway.

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Periya rose the following morning after *Aavani* had passed by to check on his battalion. Several servants carried large earthen pots filled with water to the rear of the tents for Periya's warriors, who would soon be stirring. By midday, he and his finest fighters mounted their horses and led the battalion along the trails from Kalaiyarkoil to Sivaganga palace. Just beyond the town, Periya cast a glance at the Kalaiyarkoil fort, now partially in ruins. Memories flooded back of that early morning when they had departed from the fort to pray at the temple; life had shifted irrevocably since then. The fort loomed as a solemn reminder of their fallen comrades.

The battalion followed a well-trodden path as it left the outskirts, turning left towards open fields. In mere moments, they reached fertile lands and took a direct route westward. The trail was pleasant and well-worn, requiring no guidance—the warriors knew it as intimately as their own hands; they began to relax. Some dozed atop their mounts while others exchanged bawdy jokes or tested their blades, sharpening them or adjusting their armor. Only a few engaged in conversation.

In hardly one *nazhigai*, Kollungudi palace came into view. Upon seeing its grand gates, Periya gathered his warriors around him and pointed towards the palace situated a few hundred paces away. "This is our rani's palace," he announced as his men assembled before him. "The actual palace lies further north from these gates along the trail. I will enter through these gates with my guards; you all will wait here. If you hear a cuckoo's whistle three times, I will need your assistance." The battalion nodded in agreement.

As Periya directed some men to assume positions in hiding spots nearby, he ordered his guards and select warriors to don their armor quietly, anticipating potential threats lurking within or beyond the gates. Scouts climbed atop the compound wall beside the massive wooden doors and peered into the courtyard below; if English soldiers were present, they surely would have spotted them by now. The tension among the detachment grew palpable as they awaited any sign of danger—yet only silence met their ears, broken only by rustling leaves and distant parrots gurgling cheerfully.

The heavy wooden doors creaked open from within; it took half a dozen scouts straining together to push them aside. Before Periya lay that familiar long path winding towards the porch of the palace itself—a couple of bullocks wandered aimlessly near abandoned carts along its edges, igniting a fierce glint in Periya's eyes—thirsty for English blood. He scanned both sides of the path for any sudden movements or flashes of metal but found only dry sand mixed with scattered bushes and brittle leaves.

Ultimately, there was no ambush waiting for them inside those walls. Periya and several warriors slipped past those doors and dismounted swiftly before jogging over uneven stones leading up to the porch itself. A Mandai hound barked sharply at their approach; instinctively crouching low alongside his men, Periya hefted his shield high while summoning half of his detachment inside—the remaining soldiers would hold position outside for an immediate retreat if necessary.

"What do we do now?" one warrior asked cautiously. "We move into the palace quietly," whispered Periya. Just then an Englishman emerged brandishing a musket in hand. As he aimed it towards them shouting "Who—", Periya sprang forward without hesitation, severing his head cleanly from his shoulders; gunfire erupted as a shot struck one of the thick pillars supporting that porch—the soldier hadn't been ready for such close combat.

Several of Periya's men vaulted over their fallen foe into what lay beyond—the hall—swords drawn fiercely against any unseen threat within its depths while Periya quickly silenced that barking dog with a firm command as it yelped once more before falling silent altogether.

Moments later they returned outside onto that porch dragging ten captured men behind them—all wide-eyed with terror staring first at Periya then at one another. "Please do not harm us," they pleaded desperately. Periya gripped each man firmly by an arm as they stumbled awkwardly but managed not to fall completely over themselves.

"Where are those Englishmen? Where have they gone?" he demanded sharply.

"They've left," replied one trembling voice.

"All of them?"

"Yes… except for him with that musket."

"When did they leave?"

"When news came that Kalaiyarkoil fell," came another response filled with fear.

Periya scrutinized these captives—they appeared older than expected: wiry figures marked by dirt-smudged hands and legs reminiscent more so of farmers than soldiers—all fell prostrate at his feet begging forgiveness. One sobbed recounting how they'd been held captive until this moment when freedom arrived unexpectedly after abandonment by those Englishmen who once ruled over them—a single musket bearer having killed an old man

merely because he hadn't risen quickly enough upon command just days prior….

Periya commanded a group of men to search the palace meticulously. Although it was not as grand as the Sivaganga palace, its numerous rooms and expansive backyard were filled with structures of various shapes and sizes, primarily serving as dressing areas for the royal women who bathed in the queen's swimming pool at the rear. The palace featured a sizable kitchen equipped with clay ovens and large iron pots. When the search party returned, they reported no signs of life aside from a few chickens, goats, grains, and bullocks.

That afternoon, the palace buzzed with activity; captive men were tasked with cooking for their captors using supplies from the granary. Despite it being just lunchtime, they could not resist indulging in fresh toddy paired with lamb chops, charcoal-grilled chicken, and mutton brain *sambar*. The men buried the Englishman outside the palace grounds behind an outbuilding under watchful eyes before returning to the hall where Periya had them seated and bound to pillars. He explained their situation to his prisoners and instructed his warriors not to harm them; though tied up, they were still guests at their feast. "After all," he remarked, "they were coerced by the English to side with them."

The next morning greeted the warriors with a gentle breeze and warm sunlight. Periya ordered his men to ready the carts for departure while gathering whatever remained of livestock, supplies, and groceries along with refilling their water reserves. As they collected these items, the prisoners observed closely, pleading for their freedom. Turning towards them, Periya announced, "We are leaving," proceeding to untie each one individually. They clasped their hands together in gratitude exclaiming how thankful they were that their lands would soon be returned to them while tears streamed down their faces.

Leaving them behind, Periya strode towards the main trail where horses stood tethered to nearby trees. They paused at a

pond for long baths and spent a leisurely day amidst lush greenery surrounding it. A sigh escaped Periya's lips as memories flooded back—countless times they had traveled this trail whenever the king wished to visit the temple. Eight years had slipped by without a single day passing when thoughts of his village—the palace, temple, and fort—didn't swirl through his mind like leaves caught in a restless wind. Many nights found him tossing awake under those same burdensome thoughts accompanied by feelings of helplessness; if not for the rani's perseverance, the kingdom's chieftains' faith in her, and an alliance with the Sultan's forces, the mere thought of reclaiming their lands would have remained an impossible dream.

By evening when warriors readied themselves for departure once more, Periya decided to postpone until morning instead. The towns lining their route thrummed vibrantly with life; joy radiated from every villager's face despite their ignorance regarding why Englishmen had retreated—they chose simply not to worry about what lay ahead. Village fairs overflowed with people visiting stalls filled with goods trading merrily among one another while bargaining echoed through bustling streets. Yet Periya remained vigilant alongside his warriors; upon spotting any ruined huts or garrisons along this journey made them cautious—they crouched low near cover prepared for confrontation if necessary—dividing into groups left and right off-trail scouting roughly a thousand paces ahead aiming to clear any remaining outposts taking down every visible Englishman within reach.

At last, after two arduous weeks of labor, they returned to Kalaiyarkoil, their hearts swelling with pride over the cleared paths that would grant Rani Velu's army unimpeded access for her impending assault.

◆

Chinna's men attacked in the morning.

The day Periya left, Chinna too had left with his battalion. Chinna and his men had ridden hard to Tirupattur for an entire day, resting on the outskirts of the town under the cover of night.

His battalion comprised five hundred warriors, accompanied by twenty scouts. Before them loomed a grand fort alongside a cluster of huts nestled in the marshlands to the east. As they approached the dwellings, Chinna signaled, and he and his men dismounted, sprinting towards the huts. The residents were given a stark choice: fight or flee, with most opting for the latter. A handful chose to stand their ground, offering Chinna any information he desired. "Seize all their belongings—goats, chickens, everything! They may serve us well," Chinna commanded loudly. Once they had gathered what they could, they set up camp in the forest bordering the marshlands.

By midday, Chinna's scouts returned and entered his tent where he conferred with his warriors. "How many Englishmen occupy the fort?" he inquired. "About two hundred are stationed there with a hundred muskets," one scout replied. "Originally there were five hundred, but they were ordered back to Madras due to conflict with the Mysore Sultan."

"Excellent," Chinna said thoughtfully. "In essence, we face only one hundred soldiers armed with muskets; we can easily overpower them." After a brief pause, he declared decisively, "We will start our assault at midnight tonight—scale their walls quietly and strike swiftly. We'll bring along the headman from these huts."

As his battalion navigated through the marshes beneath a moonlit sky, the fort came into view. Approximately twenty guards patrolled its top with muskets slung over their shoulders while another twenty likely roamed below on duty. With forty guards rotating shifts above, only about twenty musket men remained within the fort's walls. Chinna's men began ascending stealthily; they identified unguarded sections of the compound wall and secured their grips on metal spikes.

Once several had successfully scaled it, a bullet zipped past Chinna's face as he waited for those inside to open the gates for him. He instinctively swung his *valari* around a guard's neck before dropping him silently to the ground. At that moment, as if on

cue, other warriors hurled *valaris* onto the terrace where anguished screams erupted in an unfamiliar tongue. Another shot whizzed past him from further back on the terrace; he quickly retaliated by firing off multiple rounds as *valaris* rained down upon that direction until silence fell.

When finally those gates creaked open, Chinna's battalion surged forward into a barrage of gunfire from within the fort's confines. They spun and lunged at every foe within reach with their swords while many Englishmen panicked and attempted to flee towards safety in the marshes—only to be ruthlessly hunted down and cut down. Brighton and Martin were finally killed.

For two more weeks following this initial victory, Chinna and his men wreaked havoc upon English forces without mercy or reprieve. A bigger fight was still waiting at the Sivaganga palace. So, he let his men carpet the fort with English blood while bullock carts overflowed with plundered goods—the jubilant cries of hut dwellers echoed overhead as they received shares of this bounty. The rest of the English belongings were set ablaze.

One early morning, after two weeks of the successful assault, Chinna left.

◆

The air was thick with the scent of freshly disturbed earth and the echoes of their hard work reverberated in their minds. However, unbeknownst to them, whispers had already woven their way through the bustling streets of Sivaganga, carrying the shocking news that Rani Velu had seized Kalaiyarkovil. This revelation left Umdat, who was then in Madras and his English officers in a state of disbelief and dread. Their imagination ran wild with the possibility that Rani Velu would soon turn her fierce gaze towards Sivaganga.

In a flurry of urgency, Umdat dispatched orders to the English army officers, commanding them to reinforce security throughout Sivaganga city. Cannons were meticulously positioned at every street, their dark, menacing barrels aimed at the horizon, while watchful guards formed a tight perimeter around the grand and

imposing Sivaganga Palace. From its towering heights, soldiers stood poised with their rifles, their eyes scanning the landscape for any sign of Rani Velu's forces. Yet, despite these extensive measures, the mere mention of Rani Velu sent tremors of anxiety rippling through the ranks of the English officers. In their gatherings, they would boastfully declare, "Let's destroy Velu Nachiyar," but when alone, shadows of fear cloaked their bravado, leaving them restless and uneasy.

An order was hastily issued: shoot any suspected individuals without hesitation or inquiry, a chilling directive that hung heavily in the air. Observing this frenzy, the people of Sivaganga erupted into laughter, their spirits buoyed by the anticipation of their beloved Rani Velu Nachiyar's imminent triumph over the English army. They exchanged knowing glances and whispered among themselves, eagerly speculating on when she would finally arrive in the heart of Sivaganga city, ready to reclaim what was rightfully hers.

■

# *Sivaganga Outskirts, 1780*

One early morning in Kalaiyarkoil in the month of *Purattasi*, Periya settled beneath the swaying coconut trees of the temple grounds, sharing light-hearted jokes with Syed's soldiers, his voice bright and effervescent. However, he stiffened at the sight of the queen. With legs stretched out and words flowing quickly, he suddenly stood tall and bowed with a quickness that caught the other soldiers off guard as they followed him. Rani Velu summoned Kuyili, the head of the Udaiayal army, along with Syed, to hold a council beneath the shade of the trees.

"How is Sivaganga city?" she inquired.

"I don't know, my queen," replied Periya. But adding quickly, he said, "But we have cleared the way to Sivaganga city. We can camp in the forests on the outskirts of Sivaganga city."

The rani nodded thoughtfully. "Then tell us what you have discovered."

He bent down to pick up a twig from the ground. "May I demonstrate, Your Majesty?" The queen gave her consent with another nod. He drew a circle in the dirt and inscribed "Ka" in Tamil before connecting it to another circle with "Si." "There were hardly any Englishmen in any villages along our route to Sivaganga; those who were there met their end," he reported. He proceeded to recount each village they had visited and detailed how they dismantled small garrisons along their path. Finally, he paused before saying, "My queen, we reached Kollungudi palace."

The rani inhaled deeply and turned her gaze away, trying to mask tears welling in her eyes as she faced her men. “The palace served as a garrison; however, we expelled the English forces without significant damage done,” he continued without meeting her gaze for fear of seeing her sorrow reflected back at him.

With unwavering composure, she asked, “What news do you bring about Sivaganga palace?”

“The city is quiet; thus, the English anticipate an assault,” Periya explained. “The palace grounds are heavily fortified. Our scouts report that it has been used as an ammunition depot.”

“How many men are stationed there? How many muskets do they possess?”

“We lack precise numbers at this moment,” Periya admitted cautiously. "But rumors suggest there are at least a thousand troops alongside an equal or greater number of muskets and a substantial gunpowder supply.”

“Hmm... so much for the English recalling troops to Madras,” remarked Rani Velu thoughtfully.

“The Nawab’s son must have sent reinforcement,” said Chinna, glancing at Syed.

“They rely on sepoys instead,” interjected Syed earnestly. “They maintain sixty-seven thousand English regulars across all kingdoms—westward, eastward, northward—and throughout Carnatic territory—with over two hundred thousand sepoys lured with payments from Arcot Nawab." The rani turned towards him.

After a brief silence while scratching his beard thoughtfully, Syed added: "I doubt there will be a thousand Englishmen within that palace; more likely two or three hundred remain inside while most are sepoys."

“How many troops do we currently possess?” asked Rani Velu.

“About five thousand total—including cavalry—and nine hundred Sivaganga soldiers plus another thousand from local

chieftains, excluding the slain and the maimed," Syed replied with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Along with about a thousand more who joined us along the way here, that brings our total to about eight thousand," Periya chimed in.

"And if there are indeed one thousand English holed up within my palace—or even two—they would still be outnumbered by more than fourfold by our forces," stated the rani decisively as she observed Syed's expression shift towards concern while both Periya and Kuyili contemplated their drawn figures etched into the dirt.

"Yet still Your Majesty," Syed cautioned solemnly, "it requires numerous men to mount an attack on that palace; first our warriors must scale walls nearly ten times their height while being fired upon relentlessly."

"We can provide cover with our muskets though, can't we?" questioned Rani Velu.

"Our gunpowder reserves have greatly dwindled following the last battle at Kalaiyarkoil," Syed replied quietly lowering his eyes. "Reinforcements have been requested but will take time to arrive."

"With ongoing conflict in Madras," she mused pensively, "how much gunpowder can the Sultan afford us?"

Syed remained silent for a moment before responding cautiously: "If we manage entry into that palace…we could dismantle the British attack entirely."

"So, at this moment, we possess guns and cannons, but lack gunpowder and cannonballs, correct?" Rani Velu pressed.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Syed responded, his head lowered in deference.

"Let us rest here; it's quite cool under these trees." The rani said. Continuing, she asked, "What is the status of their supplies? How long can the Englishmen hold on while their supplies run out?"

"They may be stockpiling provisions, Your Majesty," said Syed thoughtfully. "They consume anything dry; even wheat can sustain them longer than our *chapatis* since they ferment it into loaves they call bread." He chuckled lightly at this thought.

"They certainly know how to endure hunger when needed," remarked Rani Velu with an uneasy frown.

"Most often they go without proper meals altogether—surviving mainly on alcohol instead," added Syed grimly.

"If they eat too much then sickness will follow them," laughed Periya heartily.

They lingered in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Finally, the rani spoke up, her voice breaking the stillness. "I had hoped to uncover a weakness in their defenses, but it appears we lack any useful information."

"What we require at this moment is to dispatch more scouts to gather precise details—especially regarding the numbers within the palace, at the guard towers, and the locations of their ammunition, Your Majesty," Syed interjected.

"Most importantly, we need to know how much ammunition they have. Where is the ammunition dump inside my palace," mused the rani. Continuing, "If we delay attack any longer, they will surely receive reinforcements," said the rani with urgency.

"On the contrary, Your Majesty. We can exhaust their supplies by laying siege in front of the palace. From what I understand, reinforcements will not be arriving anytime soon," Syed countered confidently.

"In that case, let us march to the palace and hold position there for two weeks. But, we shall wait for more accurate reports from our scouts before heading to Sivaganga town. There we can set up camp and monitor the movements of the English forces," said the rani in an unsure tone.

"Yes, Your Majesty; that seems like a sound strategy," Syed acknowledged.

"I suspect they might only have enough supplies to last until the rains in *Karthigai*, the rainy November," said the rani thoughtfully. As if the goddess had heard her confusion, a horn echoed through the air. Periya sprang to his feet and dashed towards the front of the temple, with Syed and Kuyili close behind.

A scout dismounted from his horse, bowing deeply before them. Sweat glistened on his brow, trickling down his face. Periya offered him a pot of water, which he accepted with gratitude. He gulped it down eagerly before splashing some over his face. "There are five hundred English men and an equal number of sepoys," the scout reported between sips of water. "The English are wary about increasing their sepoy numbers."

"And what about arms and ammunition?" Periya pressed.

"We can't determine an exact count," the scout replied, frustration evident in his voice. "All the sepoys are tight-lipped, even those who seem friendly won't divulge any information regarding their ammunition or its storage."

The scout added, "A battalion of the Nawab's son is stationed behind the Sivaganga palace. The English have placed cannons at every street, secured the perimeter of the palace, and positioned a lot of gunmen on the palace towers."

A hushed silence followed. The last bit of information took everyone off-guard, including the mighty Rani Velu.

"Good work," murmured Rani Velu with a sudden worry on her forehead.

"If we do not leave now, the British will get their reinforcements soon. But, if we leave, we might be in danger. This is the last leg," said Periya .

"We leave now for Sivaganga. By evening, we will reach the outskirts and camp in the nearby forests. We convene there for the next steps," declared the rani.

By noon, the army had gathered in formation. Leading them was Rani Velu herself, resplendent in a Kancheevaram adorned

with armor protecting her chest and arms while she held her shield and spear firmly atop her horse. A shimmering golden veil secured by a red turban cascaded over her hair, trailing elegantly behind her as she rode forward. She dispatched Periya and his scouts to survey ahead while she rode alongside Chinna and Kuyili. The Udaiyal army followed closely behind; female soldiers clad in sarees wielded swords and shields with determination.

As Rani Velu approached the Kollungudi palace, she dismounted gracefully at Ariyakurichi. At the Ayyanar *koil*, she knelt to dig a pit, carefully stuck a large stone within it. With a steady voice, she proclaimed, “This Veera Kal—brave stone—honors Udaiyal, who sacrificed her life for my sake. Hail Udaiyal.” The gathered crowd bowed their heads in reverence, their hands folded in prayer around the stone.

"Many of you are likely curious about why I had not removed my sacred marriage necklace, even following my husband’s death. I promised to wear it until our kingdom is restored," Rani Velu announced, her fingers delicately unclasping the diamond necklace from her neck before handing it to Kuyili for safekeeping. “Once we reclaim our land, a temple will rise here at the Veera Kal in honor of Udaiyal, and my necklace will serve as the first offering laid at the foot of the altar dedicated to her."

◆

The early autumn landscape burst with color even as it neared its end; mango trees flourished under bright sunlight, their fruit transitioning from vibrant green to shades of golden yellow amid lush foliage all around them. Syed turned towards the tree-dotted countryside and remarked, “It’s a beautiful land—fertile and rolling with paddy fields—Your Majesty! I’m grateful to be here.”

Though unspoken, a sharp ache filled Rani Velu’s heart at the thought of her husband’s absence—an ache that felt ever-present despite years passing since Muthu’s death. He had been more than just her spouse; he was her king, her confidant. She longed for their conversations together as well as those shared with Appa; now both

were gone, leaving an emptiness that threatened to engulf her spirit like oil clinging stubbornly to skin.

"A rider approaches," Kuyili interrupted suddenly, pointing due north with urgency in her voice. In the distance of a couple thousand paces away on their right rode an unfamiliar figure accompanied by several guards. Rather than halting their march, Kuyili urged her Udaiyal warriors to stay back while they assessed this newcomer.

"It is Chinna!" she bellowed as he reined in his steed sharply before greeting Kuyili respectfully before moving ahead to bow low before Rani Velu.

"What news do you bring?" she asked without hesitation.

"Tirupattur has been entirely cleared of English forces, Your Majesty! Shall we join you now?" Chinna responded eagerly.

"What about Buri Khan?"

"He wasn't there, Your Majesty. He fled to Arcot," Chinna replied.

With enthusiasm shining in her eyes, Rani Velu nodded vigorously and praised him for his success. As they continued riding side by side, Chinna provided detailed accounts of how many English regulars had been present during their assault: how they scaled walls only to miss shots aimed at them while managing minimal casualties among their own ranks, thanks largely due to assistance from villagers. The commanders, Brighton and Martin, were dead.

Kuyili flanked one side of the queen while Syed took position on another beside Chinna as they marched forward together—the army advancing steadily in organized columns while Syed's cavalry trailed behind them diligently prepared for what lay ahead on this twelve *nazhigais* journey towards Sivaganga forests before nightfall descended upon them all.

◆

In the distance, hidden among the shrubs, Rani Velu halted and gazed at the Sivaganga palace, which rose to meet the level of the trail. Below them lay a sea of water-soaked paddy that stretched into expansive fields speckled with delicate jasmine blooms, eventually giving way to vibrant marigold patches. Beyond these flourishing fields, dirt tracks wound through parched lands dotted with thorny bushes and scraggly shrubs. In the thick underbrush surrounding Sivaganga, the army camp was established.

Eight years ago, she had ridden away from that very palace on horseback alongside Vellachi while her husband traveled to Kalaiyarkoil fort. They had journeyed together until Kollungudi came into view when Gauri, the second wife, abruptly decided to accompany the king instead. But the rani couldn't do that because of Vellachi, and justifiably so.

Now she surveyed how dilapidated the Sivaganga houses appeared; not a single wall had been whitewashed for years. Each year before *Pongal* festivities, her subjects would scrub their homes with lime water and refresh their paint jobs with care and pride. Now those once-bright walls bore peeling lime cakes as if reflecting their owners' discontentment at being neglected. How loyal her subjects had always been! Rani Velu pondered how deeply they must long for her return to power.

A sudden image struck her: Englishmen lounging in her pool and contaminating its waters jolted her back from nostalgia's grip. With renewed determination, she retreated to her tent and summoned her generals for counsel.

"My queen, we are safe here and concealed. There is no need for alarm," Syed reassured her.

A lengthy discussion ensued about their next move.

"Let us send the battalions of Periya, Vengai Thevar, and Seemachamith Thevar to the southern edge of the Sivaganga palace, by the pond. An army of the Nawab's son is stationed there. They will engage in battle," said Rani Velu, but felt adrift about her decision, uncertainty clouding her judgment for the first time.

The others—Periya, Chinna, and Syed—engaged in an endless discussion that spiraled into confusion.

"Your Majesty," a sudden call broke through the chatter, drawing everyone's attention. The head of scouts stepped forward, confirming what they had anticipated. "I had entered Sivaganga city. Capturing it will not be as straightforward as seizing Manamadurai or Kalaiyar temple. The enemy has fortified their positions with cannons at the turn of every street, armed with guns. This is our reality."

Worry etched itself onto the faces of Chinna, Periya, Syed, and the rani. After enduring so many trials and tribulations, would they truly confront a hopeless battle as the conclusion to their journey of success thus far? Again, the English were at an advantage with arms and ammunition, while they, despite a huge army, were left without any ammunition. What an irony! This was the last and final battle, and it must unfold in this way.

◆

Just as he began to elaborate, a chuckle echoed from the shadows. As the laughter drew nearer, a woman appeared, leaning on a gnarled walking stick. Her silver hair cascaded down her back, and deep wrinkles etched her face, yet a warm smile illuminated her features as she approached Rani Velu.

"Who are you?"

The old woman stepped forward, her gnarled fingers brushing against the rough fabric of her shawl as she scrutinized each member of the coterie. Her keen, penetrating gaze flitted from face to face, assessing their resolve and courage. A sly smile played at the corners of her lips, hinting at a mind alive with schemes and possibilities.

Just as the head scout opened his mouth to voice his unease, she locked eyes with him, her expression shifting to one of fierce determination.

"What a shame! Are you afraid of firearms? Even standing amidst the thunder of cannons and the roar of artillery, we must

face them boldly. Our victory over the English is not just important; it is essential for our survival."

"Tomorrow is *Vijayadashami*, a day steeped in significance. The enemy will swing open the grand front gate of the Sivaganga palace, allowing only women to enter the revered Raja Rajeswari temple for worship. This is our moment to turn the tide."

"The brave women of the Udaiyal army, under the fearless leadership of Rani Velu, should don disguises and seamlessly blend in with the throng of worshippers. At a prearranged signal, our women will create a raucous diversion, drawing the enemy's attention away from their posts. In the ensuing chaos, they will strike swiftly at the ammunition store, catching the enemy completely off guard; the enemy will be bewildered by this unexpected onslaught. We must seize this golden opportunity and claim our hard-fought victory."

The old woman laughed heartily.

◆

Earlier in the evening, as the rani and her commanders were engaged in a discussion about their tactical maneuvers, this was what had transpired:

Kuyili dressed in the garb of an old woman—a wrinkled saree, a face mask with wrinkles, and a walking stick—flashed a smile at the intrigued glances of the female soldiers and guards stationed by the tent of Rani Velu. She walked across into the tensed streets of the city. Although autumn had arrived, summer's lingering heat enveloped her, causing beads of sweat to trickle down her forehead. She glanced towards the end of the streets where remnants of charred coal lay scattered—evidence of noon's meal prepared for clusters of sepoys huddled in streets and alleyways. Leaving behind the palace streets, she ventured into the open terrain. Eight years had slipped by, yet much remained unchanged.

On the other side of the city stretched vast fields side by side; laborers were busy planting rice and pulses while others tended to flourishing vegetable patches interspersed with rows of jasmine and

vibrant yellow chrysanthemums. The fields gradually transitioned to sandy clay soil, where sunlight filtered through gray leaves and rugged stems of shrubbery thrived in rich loam.

After walking some distance into the countryside, she paused at a fork where a narrow path intersected with the main road at an angle. The pathway was obscured beneath low-hanging thorny branches and dense underbrush, but Kuyili strode confidently as though it were familiar territory. A short while later, she arrived at a cluster of low-roofed huts nestled against a rocky slope. Approaching the thatched door of the smallest hut, she pushed it open to find her community leader seated with his family around bowls of evening gruel.

Initially startled but quickly recovering with a warm smile, he rose to greet Kuyili. "Please join us for dinner," he invited, offering her a bowl crafted from dried palm leaves along with an areca leaf spoon. She accepted gratefully and took a hearty slurp before inquiring, "What news do you have?"

"There's trouble brewing between the English at the palace and our neighboring villagers."

"Why is that?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're always looking to increase the taxes."

After a brief pause, he continued, "They've appointed what they call revenue collectors who come smilingly asking all sorts of questions as if they wish to farm our land themselves. No one has ever shown such curiosity before."

"That sounds intriguing," said Kuyili.

"They smile; we share everything—the timing of our planting, how we manage irrigation during dry spells—but then they take notes on it all. When crops fail and we plead inability to pay taxes, they wield that knowledge against us like weapons. It has left many farmers seething."

"I can see why," she replied sympathetically while patting her distant cousin's shoulder.

"So what happens now that they're holed up in the palace?"

"It works in our favor! If your army takes them down, we'll finally be free," he declared just as his wife opened her mouth to speak.

"What plans do you have for *Vijayadashami* tomorrow?" he asked.

Kuyili hesitated momentarily before his wife quickly corrected herself: "Oh right; I forgot you're part of the army now! We're so relieved—we're planning on celebrating after eight long years."

"So the women haven't visited Goddess Raja Rajeswari's temple inside the palace all this time?" Kuyili asked.

"Didn't we attend every day during those nine days back then? How the rani treated us as equals and showered us with gifts!" The wife drifted off into memories before continuing. "Last year they allowed us entry for all nine days."

"Why was that?"

"They were squeezing us dry with taxes and knew it would lead to conflict if they didn't let us maintain our customs, at the very least," she explained.

"And this year?"

"This year they're not permitting us entry." As Kuyili's expression fell at this news, she added quickly: "But there are whispers that we might be allowed into the palace temple on the tenth day, tomorrow—briefly."

"With our army so close by?" Kuyili questioned skeptically.

"They don't know that, do they?" She asked with a smile. Kuyili smiled back.

Continuing, the wife said, "The temple dancer managed to persuade the English commander to allow women in just for one day—the tenth day, *Vijayadashami*," she shared eagerly. "I still need to inform women from nearby villages."

"How did she manage that?"

"Well," she began thoughtfully, "She cautioned the English commander against his arrogance, reminding him that victory would not be easily won. She warned him that if the village women were denied entry to the palace temple for even one last day—who could predict the consequences? The villagers might unite with Rani Velu's forces and launch an assault on the palace! Their stockpile of gunpowder might prove insufficient in such a scenario," she said in a resolute tone.

Kuyili laughed heartily at this clever stance. "That's brilliant! Please extend my gratitude to the temple dancer; once we triumph, we'll ensure she will be well taken care of," she said, rising from her seat readying herself to depart.

◆

So, the night before *Vijayadashami*, after they had left Kalaiyarkoil to reach the Sivaganga forests and set up camp, sleep eluded the rani. She lay awake. Despite the fact that the English and their sepoys had been expelled from every corner of the land—from Thirupuvanam to Manamadurai, Kalaiyarkoil, Kollangudi, and Tirupattur—Rani Velu's mind was consumed with thoughts of the final, decisive battle that awaited her the next evening.

If they succeeded tomorrow, they would reclaim our entire kingdom. But what if they failed? Just the idea of it stirred a whirlwind of frustration and anxiety within her. Life would be worthless to live. The weight of these haunting thoughts twisted in the rani's bewildered mind, swirling like dark clouds gathering before a storm, each worry more suffocating than the last.

The night unfurled like a dark tapestry, its inky depths promising solitude, while the dawn loomed just beyond the horizon, indifferent to her plight. Only the arrival of the next evening would grant her a moment's reprieve from the weight of her responsibilities. The rani didn't mind surrendering to worry over sleep, acutely aware that if she didn't allow herself to drift off now, no harm would be done. The creeping tendrils of drowsiness would ensnare her during the day, leaving her restful and prepared for the battle that evening.

With this concession, she brushed aside any worries about her lack of rest, prioritizing an alertness over the fatigue that tugged at her eyelids.

■

# *Vijayadashami, Sivaganga Palace, 1780*

It was the day of reckoning, the day when good triumphed over evil. Goddess Durga had battled fiercely against the demon Mahishasura, defeating him to restore Dharma across the universe, an event celebrated as *Navaratri*. The tenth day marked the culmination of this victory, known as *Vijayadashami*.

"First, Chinna's and Periya's men will stealthily move to the rear of the palace and fight the Arcot prince's army that is stationed at the southern end by the palace pond. Second, the Udaiyal army and I will infiltrate the palace. Meanwhile, Syed and his infantry should take up strategic positions in the streets after eliminating the cannon handlers and the armed sepoys patrolling the area. Remain vigilant for enemy guards who will come to light the street torches after dusk. Do not draw their attention. I will fight the English inside the palace and open the gates. Then, Syed can enter with his cavalry and infantry from the front," the rani declared during her final meeting with her commanders.

Following the order, unnoticed by sepoys patrolling the streets, Periya's men advanced in a hushed silence, emerging from the dense, shadowy forests that cloaked their approach. Their movements were fluid and synchronized, like serpents gliding through the tall, swaying grass, each warrior instinctively mirroring the others as they navigated the underbrush. As they reached their designated location behind the grand palace, they crouched low in the marshy ground, the damp earth seeping into their clothes. The air was thick with

tension, and their senses were heightened, attuned to every rustle of leaves and distant murmur of the guards.

As Periya lit the fire torch, its bright flames flickering to life and casting a warm glow against the encroaching darkness, he raised it high, a fiery beacon that marked the start of their bold assault. He then quickly doused the torch. With a shared understanding, the warriors advanced in silence, their movements smooth and deliberate. The air crackled with anticipation as they gripped their weapons tightly, hearts racing like war drums in their chests. Each step echoed the primal urge to conquer, the scent of earth and smoke mingling with their rising adrenaline, fueling their resolve as they plunged into the depths of the looming shadows. The prince's army, blissfully unaware and still lost in the haze of slumber, lounged in their camps, lulled by the soft sounds of laughter and music that filled the evening air in anticipation of the women's festival. Colorful tents adorned the landscape, and the scent of spices wafted from simmering pots, creating an atmosphere of celebration that contrasted sharply with the impending chaos.

◆

Unaware of the commotion unfolding behind the palace, the English guards swung open the majestic gates, unveiling a vibrant scene brimming with color and energy.

On the auspicious occasion of *Vijayadashami*, a multitude of women poured into the gates, their faces alight with devotion as they carried fragrant offerings of jasmine and marigold. The air was thick with the sweet scent of incense, mingling with the sound of devotional songs that floated through the halls, accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of cymbals and the lively beats of traditional drums. Leading the singing was the temple dancer. After enduring a long period of closure, the temple's reopening sparked an electrifying wave of elation among the gathered women, who danced with abandon, their silk saris swirling like petals in the breeze.

Among the vibrant crowd, the Udaiyal army women, skillfully disguised as pious devotees, moved with practiced grace, their

swords carefully hidden in the baskets of flowers they carried. They exchanged knowing glances, their hearts racing with purpose.

Among them was Rani Velu, her identity cloaked in the guise of a humble worshipper, her keen eyes scanning the throng for any signs of danger. She blended seamlessly into the mass of colorful saris and joyful laughter, a fierce spirit concealed within a facade of serenity, ready to act when the moment demanded. Behind the rani, a few steps back, Kuyili followed quietly, masquerading as an old woman. Her weapons lay hidden in a large basket of flowers she carried.

◆

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the streets, enemy sepoys hurriedly lit street torches, their flames flickering to life with a crackling warmth. The soldiers' eyes sparkled with a mix of anticipation and desire, reflecting the golden glow as they moved swiftly, eager to return to the palace. They could almost hear the delightful jingle of the amulets that adorned the women's wrists and necks, a sound that promised an evening filled with laughter and revelry. The air was thick with the intoxicating scent of jasmine and incense, mingling with the distant notes of music that wafted through the twilight. Caught up in their excitement, the sepoys failed to notice the eerie stillness around them—the absence of sentries standing guard and the silence where cannon handlers typically prepared for battle. It had been far too long since they had indulged in such captivating entertainment, and the thought of the evening revelry consumed them, drowning out any sense of caution.

◆

The gentle swish of delicate silk sarees mingled with the clinking of brass baskets used for *puja*, creating a lively atmosphere. The giggles of unmarried women, sharing lighthearted moments, contrasted with the stern demeanor of the married women who stood nearby. As the Udaiyal women approached, anxiety gripped Rani Velu upon spotting a blockade where sepoys inspected their

offerings. Without hesitation, she drew out her weapons and tucked them into her saree while signaling her soldiers to do likewise.

At the grand entrance, temple dancers adorned in vibrant silks and intricate jewelry welcomed the women with folded hands. As they crossed the threshold into the palace, roughly a hundred paces in, they found themselves enveloped by a bustling throng of women, their voices a harmonious blend of laughter and urgent whispers. Among this swirling sea of faces were the fierce Udaiyal women, their expressions resolute, alongside the determined Kuyili and the indomitable Rani Velu.

The chaotic crowd surged forward, bodies colliding and jostling as excitement electrified the air. The Udaiyal women maneuvered through the tumult with a sense of urgency, their hearts racing as they kept their concealed weapons tucked securely beneath layers of flowing garments. Each brush against another body sent a ripple of anxiety through them, a silent vow to remain undetected, to ensure that their true identities and intentions would not be discovered amid the swirling chaos of the palace's vibrant gathering.

◆

Raja Rajeswari temple.

The doors of the sanctum sanctorum opened. "Amma! Amma!" the crowd shouted, their voices rising in a fervent chorus. Devotees filled the temple, their hands clasped in prayer, eyes glistening with devotion.

English soldiers and sepoys were everywhere, standing guard, their expressions stoic as they observed the scene unfold. Rani Velu, with a serene expression, shut her eyes tightly, immersing herself in prayers to the sacred deity.

Her soldiers stood by awaiting commands as they positioned themselves around the temple's perimeter. By this time, *puja* had commenced and no more women were being allowed inside by the sepoy guards. Kuyili gestured for her troops to hold their positions until worship concluded. The fragrance of jasmine wafted through

as final prayers began; camphor burned brightly while bells chimed melodiously.

Amid the thunderous clash of cymbals that echoed through the air like a battle cry, Kuyili deftly maneuvered through the throng of warriors to reach Rani Velu's side. Leaning closer, she whispered urgently, "Periya has triumphed over the prince's army; Syed has eliminated the street patrols." A radiant smile blossomed on the rani's face, illuminating her fierce spirit.

With a knowing glint in her eyes, she signaled her warriors with a subtle yet commanding glance. The Udaiyal army, emboldened by their leader's message, surged forward like a tidal wave, launching themselves at the English soldiers with an unyielding ferocity and unwavering determination. The air crackled with energy as the clash of swords and the cries of battle filled the atmosphere, each warrior fighting with heart and valor.

Rani Velu wielded her swords with precision, driving the blades down and severing the heads of her foes, which thudded against the earth. The women warriors surged forward and attacked, steadily increasing the number in the English officers' tally of fallen.

From the tower guard, the English commander barked orders in clipped English: "Fetch the weapons from the arms room and open fire on the enemy."

◆

Kuyili spotted several English soldiers moving past towards an area further behind them. Acting quickly under cover of shadows cast by unlit torches lining their path ahead she followed them discreetly beyond main palace corridors—the swimming pool glimmering faintly nearby—as well as stables until reaching an area where these men unlocked large bolts on what appeared to be a small granary room.

The moment they opened the entrance wide enough for passage, the sharp, acrid scent of gunpowder hit her like a wave. Sacks of gunpowder lay stacked in the granary. Beside them were rifles. In a

corner were huge cannonballs. Quickly retreating behind the sturdy temple walls, she sank to the ground, lost in fervent prayer as she contemplated her next move.

When she finally opened her eyes again, she saw a huge iron cauldron filled to the brim with lamp oil. Yelling amidst the commotion, she issued urgent commands: "No matter what happens from this point onwards, rush to the entrance gates and throw open the doors." She pointed firmly towards a distant room where flames would soon erupt.

With a thunderous shout of "Hail Raja Rajeswari," Kuyili jumped in with raised hands and immersed herself into the cauldron, the thick, viscous oil enveloping her like a second skin, glistening in the dim light. As she emerged, droplets cascading from her body, she sprinted towards the granary, urgency propelling her forward, desperate to reach her destination before the shimmering liquid could seep away into the parched earth. She crouched low, her heart pounding, as she maneuvered through the ranks of startled soldiers, their expressions a mix of confusion and disbelief.

Suddenly, a hand shot out and seized her wrist, yanking her back from the entrance of the granary. Without hesitation, she drove her dagger into the man's arm, the blade sinking deep with a satisfying squelch. He howled, releasing his grip as he stumbled back, clutching his wound. More soldiers surged towards her, their faces twisted with fury. Kuyili jabbed at them with fierce precision, her dagger slicing through the air as she targeted their legs and thighs, each thrust met with cries of agony as they crumpled to the ground around her.

Amidst the chaos, her bodyguard, waiting for the signal, stepped forward. With a swift motion, she grabbed an earthen lamp and lit herself. Flames roared to life, wrapping Kuyili in a fiery embrace that danced and flickered as she prepared for the next phase.

A handful of Englishmen who had gathered to face her went into a frenzy of panic, their faces pale as they scattered in all directions. From a distance of twenty paces, she ran towards the

granary door, a fierce determination etched on her features, just moments before the flames threatened to engulf her.

With a powerful leap and a battle cry of "Hail Raja Rajeswari!" she launched herself into the air, landing on towering stacks of gunpowder that erupted with an earthshaking explosion. The air filled with the acrid scent of smoke and sulphur as guards, armed with water buckets, sprinted towards the inferno, their eyes wide with urgency. Meanwhile, women warriors fighting near the temple, their sarees shimmering in the flickering light, froze in disbelief, their gasps echoing in the charged atmosphere. In an instant, chaos erupted among the English soldiers; they stumbled out of the shadows, weapons drawn, their faces a mix of confusion and fear as they struggled to comprehend the unfolding disaster.

Moments before, Rani Velu, who had climbed the spiraling stairs to the palace towers, gripped two swords tightly in her hands. A bullet zipped by her, narrowly missing its mark. She ducked behind a sturdy pillar, but as she peeked out, another bullet flew past her with a sharp crack. The English commander unleashed a barrage of gunfire, while Rani Velu engaged in a deadly game of hide and seek behind the stone column. Suddenly, the commander brandished his sword, a glint of steel reflecting the sunlight. At that moment, she caught sight of a figure engulfed in flames racing towards the granary. With a fierce determination, Rani Velu turned to confront the commander, launching herself forward to engage him in combat. An English sepoy hurled a spear at her; deftly, she deflected it with her sword before spinning around and driving her blade deep into the commander's spine with such force that it cleaved him in two.

Just then, a thunderous explosion erupted from the granary.

Kuyili made the immediate decision to immolate herself. Her act of martyrdom became a pivotal moment in Rani Velu's struggle against the English. A courageous woman, she possessed remarkable combat skills. She represented both independence and unwavering loyalty.

A conch sounded; the Udaiyal soldiers flung open the heavy wooden doors.

■

# *Sivaganga Palace, 1780*

The acrid scent of gunpowder hung heavily in the humid air, intertwining with the rich, loamy aroma of damp earth and decaying leaves from the dense forest surrounding them. The English officers, drenched in sweat and fear, mingled their salty perspiration with the sweet, intoxicating fragrance of wildflowers blooming defiantly amidst the chaos, creating a dissonant bouquet that filled their lungs. As they retreated in disarray, several officers and their weary subordinates stumbled over roots and rocks, their bodies marred with bruises and gashes from the brutal clash. A palpable sense of despair enveloped them, a suffocating realization dawning that Rani Velu Nachiyar was an indomitable force they could not hope to conquer.

Like cornered animals, the English fled from the relentless barrage of her fierce attacks, desperate to escape to distant lands where they might find solace. Yet, some fell to their knees at her feet, pleading for mercy, their voices trembling with fear and desperation. In an unexpected twist of fate, they were granted a second chance to live in the very kingdom they had once sought to dominate.

Meanwhile, the people of Sivaganga erupted in fervent excitement, their voices rising like a chorus as they called for Rani Velu Nachiyar to ascend to the throne after her stunning victory. Groups formed around her, eager to implore her to accept the mantle of leadership and guide them as their queen. However, she remained silent, her heart heavy with the weight of loss. Instead

of embracing the crown, she chose to declare a week of mourning across the Sivaganga kingdom, a solemn tribute to the brave martyrs who had sacrificed everything for the pursuit of freedom.

During this week of remembrance, the air buzzed with hushed conversations filled with reverence, as residents gathered in small circles to recount tales of valor and heroism. They shared stories of Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Oodaya Thevar, whose wisdom had inspired them, junior Rani Gauri Nachiyar, whose courage had shone brightly, Udaiyal, who had fought fiercely, Prime Minister Thandavarayan Pillai, whose strategies had guided them, and Kuyili, whose spirit embodied their struggle. Each name evoked profound sorrow and deep respect, weaving a tapestry of collective memory that bound the community together in their grief and gratitude.

A week slipped by, filled with anticipation and whispers of change. At last, a decree rang out across the land, proclaimed by a messenger whose voice boomed like thunder as he struck the *thandora* drums. His announcement declared Rani Velu Nachiyar the Queen of Sivaganga, a moment long awaited by the townsfolk. As dawn broke on the day of the coronation, a vast sea of humanity surged towards Sivaganga from every corner of the region. Men and women, young and old, boys and girls, converged in a kaleidoscope of excitement, traveling in bullock carts creaking under the weight of jubilant families, horse-drawn carriages adorned with garlands, and on foot, their laughter and chatter echoing through the air like a joyous melody.

Sivaganga transformed into a vibrant tapestry of celebration; every street burst with colorful floral decorations, marigolds and jasmine strung together to create a fragrant canopy. The palace walls gleamed with fresh coats of paint, brightening the once-muted hues into a dazzling display of royal colors. Inside the main hall, newly commissioned paintings depicting heroic tales and divine blessings breathed life into the space, while the air was thick with the rich scent of sandalwood and rosewater, wrapping around the gathering like a warm embrace.

In the palace courtyard, a magnificent stage stood tall, newly erected for this momentous occasion. Its front boasted a private seating area draped in silks, reserved for the esteemed guests who had traveled from far and wide. News of the coronation had spread like wildfire, drawing many kings and dignitaries from neighboring realms, all eager to witness the ceremony that was just beginning. The atmosphere buzzed with the vibrant sounds of *nadaswaram* instruments and rhythmic drumbeats, mingling with sacred chants that floated from the priests, their voices rising in harmony.

To the left of the stage stood the sword regiments, their armor glinting in the sun, while the *valari* regiments formed a formidable presence. On the right, Gopal Nayakar's troops and Syed Karki's horse regiments displayed their might, proud and poised. Facing the stage directly was the Udaiyal army, disciplined and ready. As the grand palace doors swung open, a wave of exhilaration washed over the crowd, and they erupted in unison, "Hail Velu Nachiyar, hail Velu Nachiyar!" The sound reverberated through the air, a chorus of hope and celebration, marking the dawn of a new era for Sivaganga.

All eyes were drawn to her, and Rani Velu Nachiyar strode forward with a regal grace, the gleaming sword at her waist catching the sunlight as she approached the Maruthu brothers. A wave of exhilaration swept through the crowd, igniting cheers and shouts of admiration as they beheld Rani Velu Nachiyar's commanding presence. Those who glimpsed her head marveled at the dark hair, intricately braided and adorned with delicate flowers, while others gazed intently at her face, where fierce determination mingled with an undeniable beauty. The depth of her eyes, fierce yet compassionate, captivated those who dared to meet her gaze, while her strong hands, calloused from years of battle, drew respect and awe. The sword, a symbol of her strength and leadership, was firmly inserted into her waist, radiating power and authority. Her majestic stride demanded attention, and the rhythm of her feet resonated with the hearts of her people. Some in the crowd wiped away tears, mourning the struggles that had marked Rani Velu Nachiyar's

journey, while others stood tall, filled with pride at the sight of their fearless leader. Following closely behind was Princess Vellachi Nachiyar, once a toddler who had left Sivaganga cradled in her mother's arms, now transformed into a young woman, her spirit brightened by the joy of reunion. The people rejoiced at the sight of her, their hearts swelling with hope and admiration.

Amidst the jubilant cheers and vibrant celebrations from the crowd, Rani Velu Nachiyar sat regally on her intricately carved throne, a symbol of her authority and grace. Draped in a stunning red silk saree that shimmered like embers in the sun, its thick-bordered hem glistened with gold thread, catching the light with every slight movement. A long strip of golden royal cloth draped over both shoulders, its ends cascading down the front and cinched at the waist with an ornate gold belt. The soft silk chest band hugged her form, its texture reminiscent of velvet against her skin, enhancing her royal presence. A delicate veil, woven with fine threads of gold, cascaded elegantly from the back of her head, framing her radiant features like a halo.

Gold necklaces, each piece more exquisite than the last, rested against her collarbone, while bangles jingled softly on her wrists, their intricate designs telling stories of artisans long past. Armlets adorned her upper arms, and diamond-studded earrings sparkled like stars, adding a touch of brilliance to her ensemble. Atop it all rested the rani's signature half-smile, her pearly white teeth gleaming like polished ivory against the backdrop of silky black strands artfully pinned into a side bun.

Seated on her right, Vellachi, the slender princess, radiated warmth in a flowing silk skirt that swirled gracefully around her legs and a matching blouse that accentuated her youthful elegance. Her face was illuminated by an infectious smile that spread joy to those around her. Standing proudly behind her were her generals, Periya Maruthu and Chinna Maruthu, clad in fine silk *veshti*s that draped elegantly over their frames, complemented by crisp shirts topped with ornate turbans that signified their high status. Their bodies

gleamed with gold jewelry, pieces that reflected their rank and valor, as they stood at attention, ready to serve their queen.

As the magnificent Sivaganga crown, studded with shimmering pearls and adorned with a diamond-encrusted design, settled onto her head, the pearls cascaded down, glittering with dazzling brilliance, a fitting accessory for the ruler of such a storied kingdom. Amidst the fervent chants of "Hail Rani Velu Nachiyar!" echoing through the air, the rani proclaimed with unwavering conviction, "Our kingdom shall proudly bear its original name: Sivaganga." The throng erupted in a chorus of cheers, their voices rising in unison as they shouted, "Long live Sivaganga; long live our queen!"

With a commanding presence, she then instructed the royal architects to construct temples dedicated to the revered Udaiyal in her village, ensuring that her legacy would be honored for generations to come. Handing over her sacred diamond-studded marriage necklace to the priests, she declared, "Please accept my offering to the Udaiyal temple."

After a while, she stood up, waving to the cheers of the crowd. "I am delighted to present this gold bear doll as a souvenir of our victory to Gopal Nayakar, the leader who offered me shelter and laid the groundwork for all my triumphs when I fled our homeland after my husband was martyred. I am also pleased to present this golden tiger doll to the hero Hyder Ali, who provided us with essential cavalry and infantry, along with modern weaponry that strengthened our fight against the English. He has sent his congratulations through his commander for this joyous occasion, as a token of our victory," Rani Velu announced after extending her congratulations to Syed Karki.

"With your approval," Rani Velu Nachiyar addressed the crowd, her voice steady and resolute, "I hereby appoint Periya Maruthu, the eldest of the Maruthu brothers, a steadfast loyalist who has been my pillar during these challenging years, as Commander-in-Chief. Alongside him, I name his brother, Chinna Maruthu, another devoted loyalist whose commitment to our kingdom is

unwavering, as my Chief Minister." The air filled with the sound of enthusiastic applause, echoing for a long time.

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A lavish luncheon feast awaited the assembled crowd, a vivid mosaic of colors and enticing aromas enveloping the air with the fragrance of cardamom, coconut, rice, and lentils, alongside spiced meats, an array of vegetables, and an abundance of sweets. The *Karthigai*—wintry November—sun shone brightly through soft, intermittent showers that infused the atmosphere with a refreshing coolness, elevating the spirits of all who were present. Its golden rays illuminated the cheerful faces, each one reflecting the joy of unity and the blessings of prosperity. Laughter and music mingled, creating a lively atmosphere of camaraderie. Yet, amidst the revelry, Syed Karki stepped forward, his expression starkly contrasting the festive scene. His brow furrowed deeply, worry etched into his features as he scanned the jubilant crowd. With a heavy heart, he voiced his desire to depart, feeling the weight of responsibility pressing upon him. He knew his skills as a warrior and operational prowess were urgently needed in the ongoing conflict with Madras, a grim reminder of the challenges that still lay ahead. The clamor of celebration faded into the background as he contemplated the duties awaiting him.

"We cannot thank you enough for your invaluable assistance, Commander Syed Karki," Rani Velu said graciously, her voice warm as her handmaid adjusted the intricate folds of her silk sari, preparing to leave for the grand banquet.

"As a token of our gratitude, please accept more gifts for Sultan Hyder Ali," Rani Velu gestured towards the large chests lined with rich, vibrant fabrics, overflowing with shimmering silk and sturdy cotton, their surfaces glistening in the soft light. Smaller chests, adorned with delicate carvings, were filled to the brim with sparkling pearls and gold pagodas and a few precious stones that caught his eye.

Syed's face brightened, his eyes reflecting the treasures before him as he bowed deeply in appreciation, a gesture of respect and honor. "Kindly inform the Sultan that we will offer land for the construction of mosques within our kingdom as a token of appreciation for your prompt assistance," she said, her expression earnest and unwavering.

Syed bowed once more, his expression earnest as he replied, "Thank you, Your Majesty. We are honored to stand alongside you in reclaiming your kingdom." Rani Velu responded with a warm smile, her eyes shining with hope, and gave a slight nod, acknowledging his response.

As throngs of people gathered before the towering gates of the grand palace, a messenger emerged from the palace, his voice cutting through the din with clarity and purpose. "This is to inform all of you…," he yelled, announcing an open invitation for all to join in the opulent royal feast. Throughout the kingdom, choultries bustled with activity, their long tables groaning under the weight of an exquisite assortment of dishes—aromatic *biryanis* that released steam and spices into the air, vibrant curries simmering in rich sauces, and an array of decadent sweets, each more tempting than the last, ensuring every taste was catered to.

Amidst the jubilant cheers of "Hail Rani Velu Nachiyar!" that echoed like a victorious anthem, the queen emerged, her silhouette framed against the golden light of the setting sun. She moved with a grace that seemed to draw every eye, her regal attire shimmering with intricate embroidery as she waved to the adoring crowd. The fervent cries of celebration swelled around her, a harmonious blend of gratitude and admiration that enveloped the square. In the depths of her loss, she had risen like a phoenix, conquering despair to win the hearts of her people, solidifying her legacy as a cherished leader whose spirit would forever inspire.

■

# *Glossary*

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|---|---|
| Aadi | Tamil month between the Gregorian months of mid-July to mid-August |
| Aavani | Tamil month between mid-August and mid-September |
| Adirasam | Traditional Indian sweet made from rice flour and jaggery |
| Agninakshtram | Hottest period of the year referring to the month of May |
| Agraharam | Rows of houses lining a street that leads to a central temple |
| Akka | Elder sister |
| Angavastram | Shoulder cloth worn by men |
| Anthapuram | A palace's inner apartments for queens |
| Appa | Father |
| Cummerbund | Waist sash |
| Durbar | Court |
| Hakim | Herbal physician |
| Kadam | Equivalent to a kilometer |
| Kalasam | Finial used to top the domes of temples |
| Kalyana Mandapam | A large ceremony hall |
| Kanam | A span of four minutes |
| Karakattam | An ancient Tamil folk dance |
| Karthigai | Tamil month between mid-November and mid-December |
| Kolam | An Art form in which patterns are drawn on the floor using dry rice flour |
| Koil/Kovil | Temple |
| Kombu | War trumpet |

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|---|---|
| Marava | Tamil community historically known as warriors |
| Margazhi | Tamil month between mid-December and mid-January |
| Masi | Tamil month between mid-February and mid-March |
| Mulams | Feet |
| Murasu | War drums |
| Nadaswaram | A double reed wind instrument played for auspicious events |
| Nayakar | Military commanders in the Vijayanagara Empire |
| Navaratri | Annual nine-day festival in honor of Goddess Durga |
| Nazhigai | A span of twenty-four minutes |
| Neem | Margosa, Indian lilac |
| Pagodas | Gold or half-gold coins, unit of currency |
| Palayams | Provinces |
| Palayakkarar | Provincial chieftains who held a small territory or *palayam* |
| Panguni | Tamil month between mid-March and mid-April |
| Pongal | Popular dish made of rice and moong dal lentils |
| Punkah man | A person manually operating a hand-pulled fan |
| Purattasi | Tamil month between mid-September to mid-October |
| Sherogars | Military servants |
| Siddha | Ancient Indian medical system originating in the Tamil-speaking regions |
| Silambam | Bamboo stick-based Tamil martial art and sport |
| Thaaye | Mother |
| Thai | An auspicious Tamil month between mid-January and mid-February |
| Thavil | Barrel-shaped percussion instrument accompanying the nadaswaram |
| Udankattai | The Sati practice of South India |

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|---|---|
| Upma | Breakfast dish made of boiled semolina mixed with vegetables |
| Valari | Traditional Tamil weapon similar to a boomerang |
| Vijayadashami | Festival celebrated at the end of Navaratri on the tenth day |

***The Last Sethu Queen***, a well-researched historical novel, chronicles the epic story of Rani Velu Nachiyar—from a queen to a fierce warrior, her fury unleashing vengeance on the British, and how she became a goddess to her people and a heroine of Tamil history. Rani Velu Nachiyar, the queen of the Sivaganga kingdom nestled in the serene and southernmost part of India, was forced to flee her homeland after her husband, Raja Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar, was killed in a treacherous and brutal British invasion. During this tumultuous time, she raised and trained an all-female military unit. After years filled with relentless perseverance, she finally garnered support from Hyder Ali. With renewed hope, she embarked on a mission to reclaim her kingdom. Will she succeed in driving out the formidable British and their advanced weaponry with her fierce army?

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